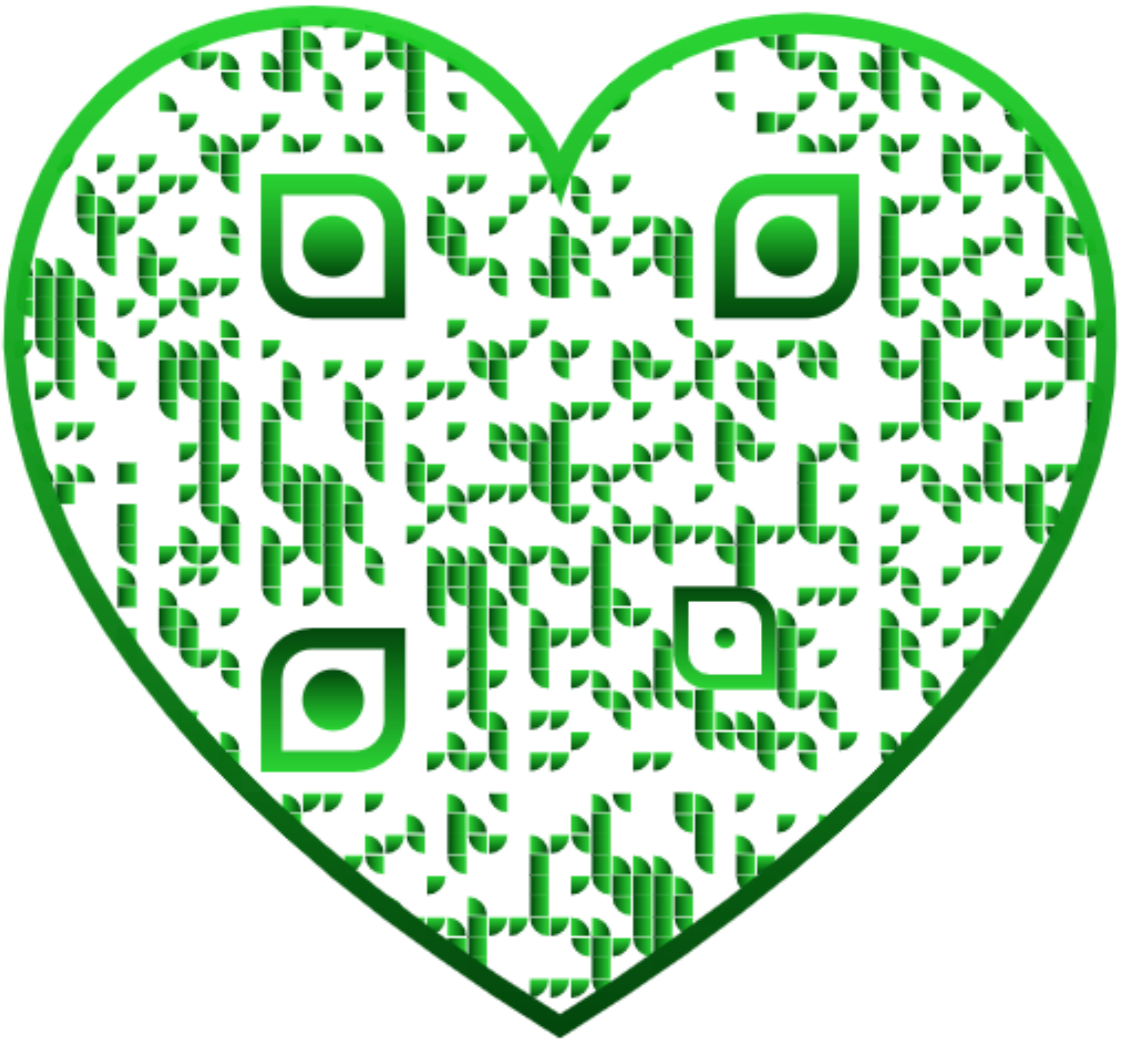
Rolling Stone
ISSUE 1367
Harry Styles
The World's Most Wanted Man



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TOP BY BOTTER. SHORTS BY JW ANDERSON. SHOES BY ERL.

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Harry Styles, photographed in London on May 6, 2022, by **Amanda Fordyce**.

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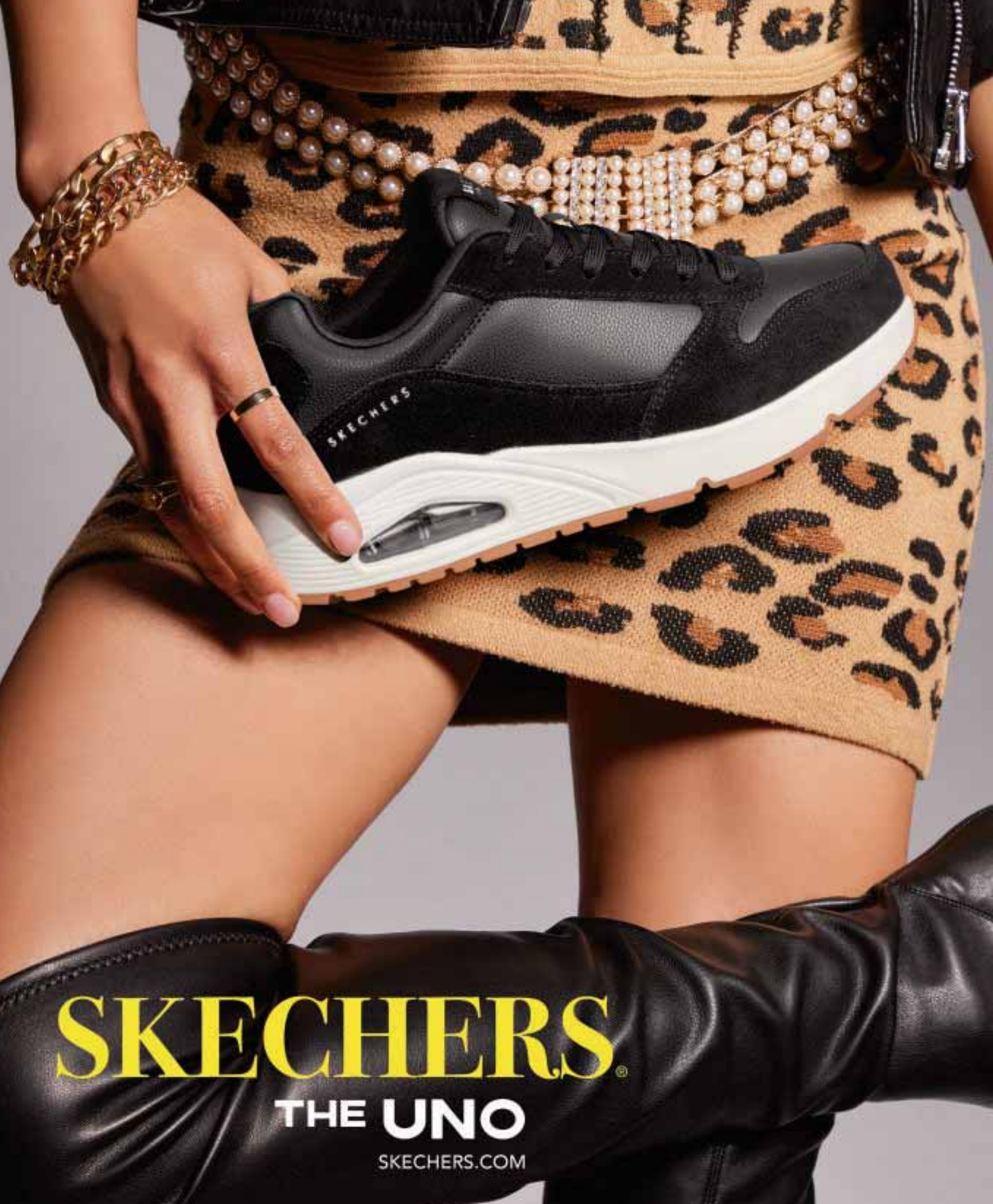
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Stories of a King

NEW ALBUM
OUT NOW
ALL PLATFORMS

FEATURING
‘MESSY’

PRODUCED BY SCOTT STORCH
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OR

Opening Act

Willow's Wide-Open Mind Keeps Expanding

WILLOW'S PERFORMANCE at this year's Lollapalooza was one of the festival's most-anticipated moments, with fans chanting her name as she took the stage for energetic renditions of songs like "Transparent Soul," her pop-punk smash with Travis Barker. Backstage, the 21-year-old artist talked about one of her biggest recent influences: Queen. "'Bohemian Rhapsody' was the craziest [song]," she says. "Nobody could even think about putting a beautiful operatic part right next to a metal breakdown and insane guitar solo." When it comes to the legacy she's building for herself, she adds, "I want people to be like, 'Willow always did what was in her heart.'"

Willow in Chicago, July 2022

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The Mix

WHAT'S NEW, WHAT'S NEXT, WHAT'S NUTS

Heavy Is the Hand That Holds the Mic

Doechii has a big spotlight on her as TDE's first female rapper. She couldn't be more ready

→

PHOTOGRAPH BY **Nicol Biesek** | 11

HAIR BY TYLER. MAKEUP BY KAVONDRE ONAZH. STYLING BY TIZITA BALEMLAY.

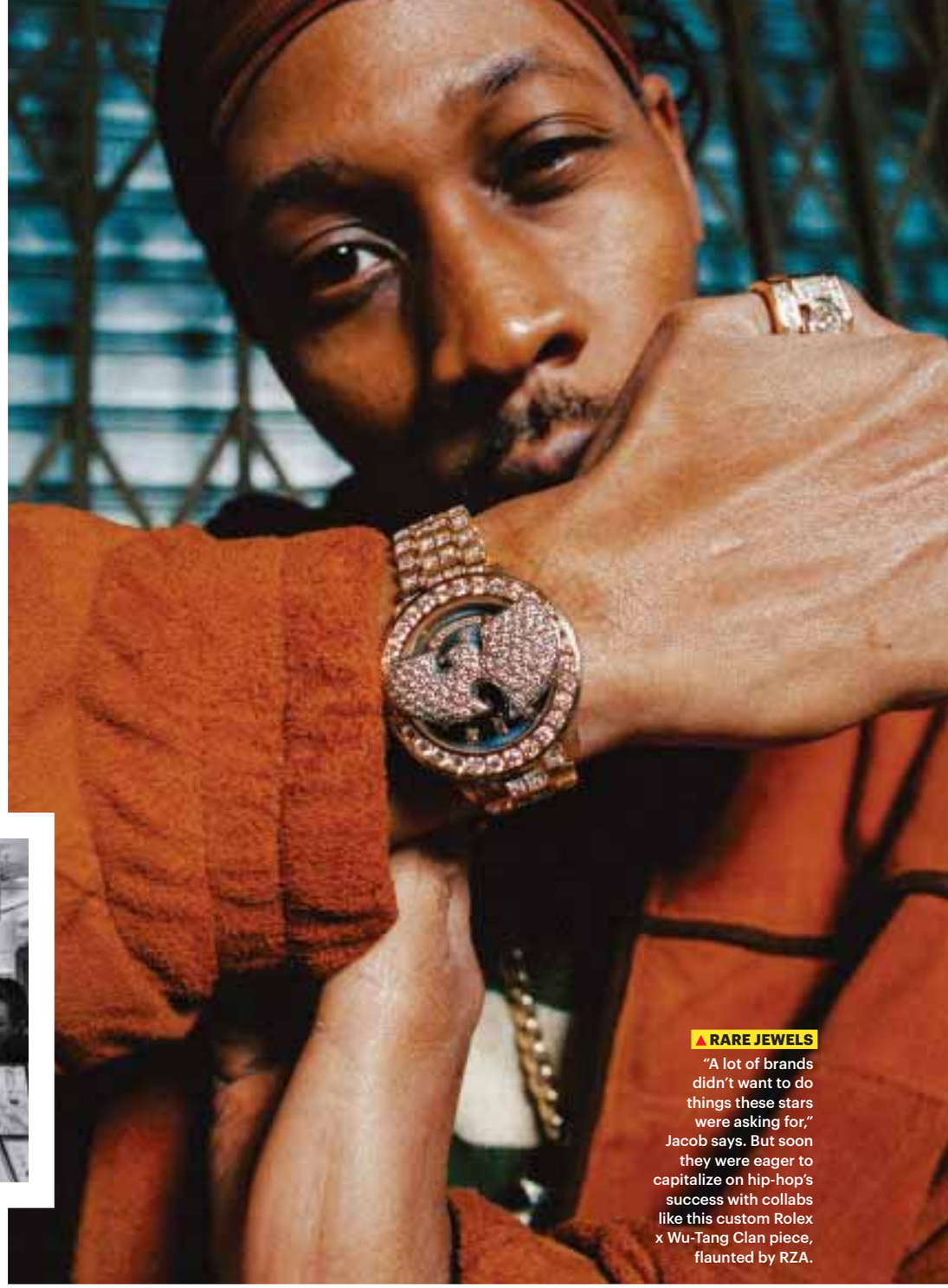
BOOK

Decades of Hip-Hop Decadence

SINCE THE EIGHTIES, three key forces have defined trends in jewelry: rappers, drug dealers, and Jacob the Jeweler. As hip-hop artists emulated the expensive looks of street-level kingpins, designer Jacob Arabo – dubbed Jacob the Jeweler by Biggie Smalls himself – was there to customize their pieces with innovative prowess. "You could say I was the pioneer that started adding diamonds to men's watches, because at that particular time, only women's timepieces had them," he says. "This became a revolutionized moment in fashion for men who now wanted bling." His work is a big part of Vikki Tobak's new art book, *Ice Cold: A Hip-Hop Jewelry History*, in which Slick Rick, A$AP Ferg, LL Cool J, and others recount their relationship with jewelry and its significance in music. KYLE RICE

Ice Cold
Taschen
$100

▲ THE O.G. IN HIS KINGDOM
There isn't a person alive whose impact on modern-day jewelry trends is as great as that of Jacob the Jeweler, seen here in the 1990s at his Diamond District shop in Manhattan.



▲ RARE JEWELS
"A lot of brands didn't want to do things these stars were asking for," Jacob says. But soon they were eager to capitalize on hip-hop's success with collabs like this custom Rolex x Wu-Tang Clan piece, flaunted by RZA.

FROM LEFT: JAMEL SHABAZZ; ARMEN DJERRAHIAN

DOECHII

WORKING IN THE Carson, California, studio from which Top Dawg Entertainment was launched has become something of a rite of passage for new artists on the label. After building the studio in the back of his suburban home around 2004, founder Anthony "Top Dawg" Tiffith rounded up four of the most-talented MCs in the L.A. area – Kendrick Lamar, Jay Rock, ScHoolboy Q, and Ab-Soul – and brought out the best in them. Nearly two decades later, TDE's first female rapper found herself in the wood-paneled, windowless cave known as the House of Pain. "Yes, child, they had me in that cold-ass studio," says Doechii. "I was in that studio struggling, writing music, no heater. I don't want to go back."

Doechii, 24, caught the attention of multiple labels after her breakout hit, 2020's keenly autobiographical "Yucky Blucky Fruitcake," took off on TikTok – notably as a soundtrack to people showing who they once were and who they are now. "I didn't predict that there would be people showing their weight transformations, or trans women and trans men showing their transitions, people showing their glow-ups," Doechii told ROLLING STONE last year.

FAST FACTS

IN THE STARS Doechii wants her debut to reflect four tarot cards: death, the devil, the hermit, and the star.

SHOTS She and SZA bonded over drinks: "We got drunk together. I felt like we really connected over that tequila."

She wasn't interested in most of the labels that pursued her, but when Top Dawg's son Anthony "Moosa" Tiffith, now TDE's president, got in touch, the alignment was almost immediate. Within two weeks of her first meeting with TDE, she had moved to L.A., leaving most of her belongings back in Georgia with her mom. "Child, I left that stuff," she recalls. "I got that check. It was over."

As she has gained notoriety for her animated rap delivery, quirky narratives, gorgeous singing voice, and predilection for house beats, Doechii has been compared to successes like Nicki Minaj, Missy Elliott, and Azaelia Banks. While she appreciates the comparisons, she

◀ LIFE AFTER DEATH

Biggie's Jesus pieces are iconic. Jay-Z famously wears one of them as a tribute to his late friend. "It's part of my ritual when I record an album: I wear the Jesus piece and let my hair grow till I'm done," Jay wrote in his 2010 memoir, *Decoded*.

▼ LONG LIVE VIRGIL

Virgil Abloh, who launched Pyrex and Off-White before becoming Louis Vuitton's first Black artistic director, broke boundaries in fashion by combining luxury motifs with Black codes. Here, the late trendsetter wears grillz and stacked rings.

▶ ROXANNE'S REVENGE

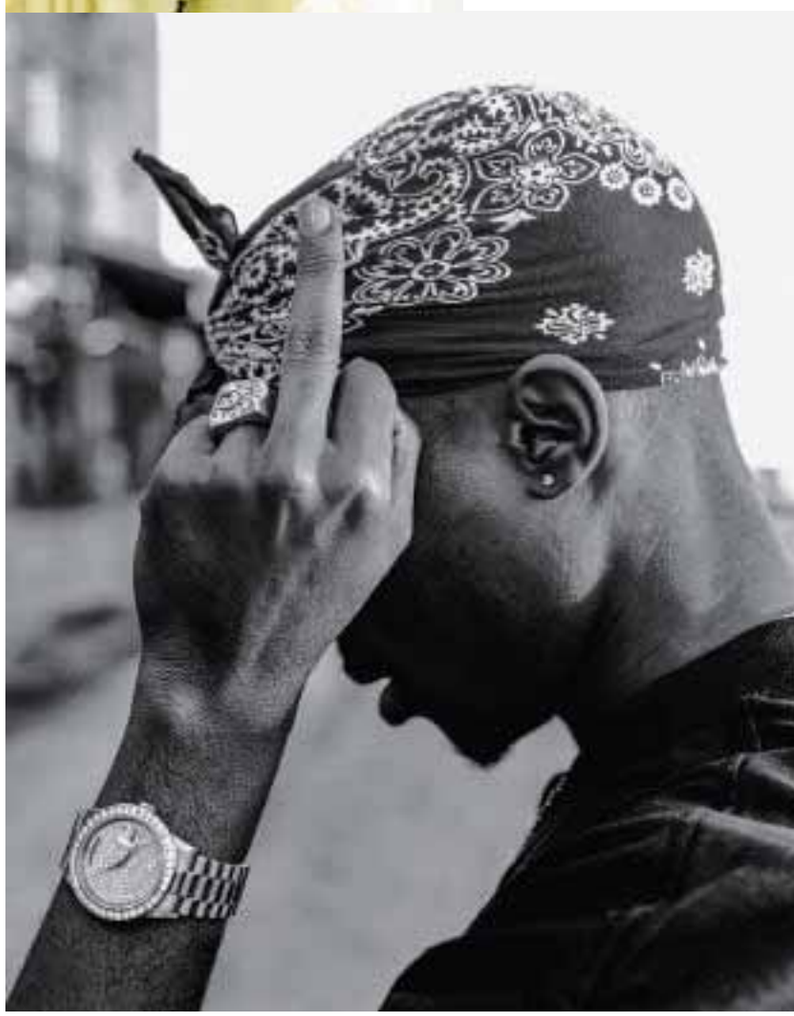
Roxanne Shante changed the game when she arrived in the 1980s — a teenage girl dissing the industry and looking fly while doing it. Her style became a source of inspiration, complete with her signature door-knocker earrings.

▶ ALL EYEZ ON HIM

The Day-Date President, originally released in 1956, and customized here with a diamond-covered face for Tupac Shakur, may not be one of the most expensive Rolexes ever offered, at an estimated $45,000 — but it's one of the rarest. Pac reportedly gave Biggie his first one as a gift in the early Nineties.

◀ WHAT TIME IS IT?

Jacob the Jeweler's Five Time Zone watch, seen on A$AP Ferg, was a revolution to the industry when he introduced it in 2002. "Back then, there was no iPhone to check different time zones quickly, and world-time watches didn't really exist," Jacob says.



FROM TOP, LEFT TO RIGHT: MICHAEL LAVINE; C.T. ROBERT; DAVID CORIO; KENNETH CAPPELLO; MIKE MILLER

isn't giving them much credence. "It's just like the first time the world got exposed to Lady Gaga," she says. "A lot of their comparisons lay with Madonna, because they [were] trying to make sense of what's happening now based on what they've heard before."

Doechii is at once serious and silly, slick and unhinged. She's comfortable over all kinds of production, from celestial slow jams to eccentric rap beats to pulsing dance music. This agility shines on a recent EP called *she/her/black bitch*. Doechii says she reclaimed the slur after it followed her around Tampa, Florida, where she grew up – from predominantly white schools to mostly Hispanic neighborhoods to primarily Black ones, those words were there, trying to degrade her. "I have embodied the slur 'Black bitch' and made a whole archetype out of it," she says. "I see this Black girl, and she's superpowerful, creative, confident. She knows who she is."

"I'm excited for the future of the label," says Doechii, who is the first female rapper on TDE. "Because I *am* the future of the label."

As a teen, she got serious about dance, studying ballet, tap, contemporary, and gymnastics. She performed with a marching band. She started a vlog where she told elaborate and exaggerated stories about her life. Today, you can see her skills of movement and persona in videos like the nudity- and violence-laden one for her spring single, "Crazy," which was age-restricted on YouTube.

As she continues to work on her debut for TDE, including sessions with Pharrell Williams and Babyface, Doechii is mindful of her place on one of the most influential labels of the past decade. She's grateful for the example set by SZA, with whom she's toured and recorded: "SZA really paved a way," Doechii says. "It made my job easier. Now they know that not only can women sell, but really we bring the most money in."

She cites Kendrick Lamar, who left TDE this year, as another "beacon of light." "He's a huge example for all of us," she says. "I'm excited for the future of the label, because I *am* the future of the label." **MANKAPRR CONTEH**

RS RECOMMENDS

OUR TOP POP-CULTURE PICKS OF THE MONTH

SINGLE

1. "Blondshell's "Sepsis"

"I'm going back to him/I know my therapist's pissed," Blondshell — 24-year-old singer-songwriter Sabrina Teitelbaum — sings on the latest phenomenally catchy alt-rock blast from her hotly buzzed upcoming debut LP, due out in early 2023. Catch her on tour this fall.

MOVIE

2. 'Catharine Called Birdy'

A.K.A. "Lena Dunham and the Holy Grail." The *Tiny Furniture* writer-director turns in a breezy, funny feminist medieval comedy about a young woman nicknamed Birdy (*Game of Thrones*' Bella Ramsey) trying to avoid being married off by her parents.

VIDEO GAME

3. 'The Last of Us: Part 1'

A remake of a classic video game, this emotionally harrowing experience follows a grizzled smuggler and mouthy orphan fighting for survival in a post-apocalyptic America. Coming to PlayStation 5 ahead of its upcoming HBO adaptation.

TOUR

4. Lizzo

Hot off the release of her great new album, *Special,* one of pop's eclectic performers is back on the road, delivering good-as-hell disco-soul fire and bad-bitch affirmation to an arena new you.

BOOK

5. 'How We Roll'

Ever wonder how the joint was invented? Or how the New York City blunt came to be? This book offers insights and interviews with famous potheads (Tommy Chong, Wiz Khalifa), as well as detailed instructions to make anyone an expert.

MOVIE

6. 'Blonde'

Filmmaker Andrew Dominik takes on Joyce Carol Oates' fictional novel — don't call it a biopic! — about Marilyn Monroe, with Ana de Armas done up as an eerie doppelgänger for the iconic movie star and an NC-17 rating that is reportedly well-earned.

DOCUMENTARY

7. 'Untrapped: The Story of Lil Baby'

An inspiring look at Lil Baby's journey, from his hustler years to his recent role as an advocate for the Movement for Black Lives. The documentary, streaming on Amazon Prime, lovingly depicts the Atlanta rapper's passions, motivations, and drives, and culminates in his heartfelt performance at last year's Grammy Awards.

For reviews, premieres, and more, go to RollingStone.com/music

TV SHOW

8. 'Los Espookys'

The offbeat, multilingual comedy — about friends who stage horror-movie-style scenarios to help solve their clients' problems — is finally back, with the gang being haunted by the ghost of a beauty-pageant queen and trying to appease some literal inner demons.

ALBUM

9. 'Lou Reed: Words and Music, May 1965'

This revealing archival set contains the earliest known recordings from the godfather of punk, then in his folk phase, but already gesturing toward the raw, poetic genius of the Velvet Underground, especially on primordial versions of "Heroin" and "I'm Waiting for the Man."

A TRANS SKATER FINDS NEW FREEDOM

SINCE QUITTING the U.S. Olympic team and stepping away from competitive skateboarding, Leo Baker has had no regrets. "I am happier than I've ever been," he says.

After rising to fame as a child skater, Baker was considered a sure thing at the 2020 Tokyo games. A new documentary, *Stay on Board: The Leo Baker Story,* out now on Netflix, captures his ambivalence: In addition to feeling disillusioned by the rigidity of the Olympic-trials process — which he repeatedly describes as "bleak" — he was also growing tired of being categorized as a female skater. Baker came out as trans-masculine in late 2019, and in early 2020, he left Team USA.

Now 30, he's sponsored by Nike and skates for his own queer-centric company, Glue. "We do things we were never able to do because there was not space for trans queer people," he says. "We're living our childhood dreams."

A guitar player since 14, Baker is also starting a music career. His first song, "Hold Me Til We're Home," plays at the end of the doc, and is credited to Leo Popstar. "I just think that's such a funny name for the music," he says.

Despite his prominence, Baker has been taking time for himself. "I love to do things alone," he says. "I write music. I go to the gym. I like to feel anonymous. I've been reading so much Buddhist literature, I'm like, 'The less of me there is, the happier I am.'" **ANDREA MARKS**

FROM TOP LEFT TO RIGHT: CHARLIE GILLETT COLLECTION/REDFERNS; MATT KENNEDY/NETFLIX; NDZ/STAR MAX/GC IMAGES; ERIKA GOLDRING/WIREIMAGE; NETFLIX; DOMINIQUE FALCONE

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MY OBSESSION

A SERIES IN WHICH ARTISTS SHARE THEIR NONMUSICAL PASSIONS

Twista: Master of Puppets

TWISTA IS A PEOPLE PLEASER. He loves to give that "whoa!" factor when he performs; just look at the speed-rapping skills that once earned him a place in the *Guinness World Records,* not to mention a gold-certified hit with 2004's "Overnight Celebrity." Years before either achievement, the Chicago native found a passion for ventriloquism — and lately he's rediscovered that spark.

Twista first took an interest in ventriloquism and magic around age 10, inspired in part by watching the 1978 thriller *Magic*. Soon, he was doing tricks on the side as his career as an extraordinarily fast rapper took off. "If we were on tour and we go into a gas station and they have some little Muppet or puppet in there, I'm grabbing it," he says. "I'm amazing the homies. I'm doing something for the people in the store. It's always something I've done naturally if I come across a puppet or doll."

For his birthday a few years ago, a friend bought Twista his first real ventriloquism puppet, named Groucho. He immediately began writing a comedic act for Groucho that he hopes to finish and perform one day. "He's trying to take my job," Twista explains. "I think it'll be fun for people to see the puppet rapping fast without me moving my lips."

It's only the latest new beginning in a life full of them. As a teen, Twista made money selling his drawings of popular figures like Freddy Krueger and LL Cool J. Over the years, he's studied and learned all kinds of magic: card tricks, sleight of hand, coin tricks. He even wrote a song for one of his heroes, David Blaine. "I'm just bragging about him being the dopest magician," he says of the unreleased track.

He recently had a second, look-alike puppet made, called Lil Twista, and he's interested in everything from performing for kids to having his own show in Las Vegas. "I have a lot of passion for making people happy," he says. "I want you to come out of any situation with me with a positive mindset." **BRITTANY SPANOS**

Twista (right) with Lil Twista in Chicago. The look-alike puppet was fabricated for him by Smithsen Puppets. ▶

Twista

FAN COMMUNITY

MORE THAN JUST THE MUSIC: HOW MUSE INSPIRE UNITY AMONG THEIR MOST DEDICATED FANS

PRESENTED BY

JIM BEAM WELCOME SESSIONS

In our third Welcome Sessions feature with Jim Beam, we talk to fans about the community they've built around live music as they share stories of creating bonds.

Written by WILL "ILL WILL" LAVIN

Music is a powerful force that can serve many purposes and its strongest trait is the ability to bring people together. While a favorite record or a poignant lyric is often times what ushers a newcomer into the fold of a fanbase, it's the interpersonal connections and the shared experiences that make that person a lifelong member.

For passionate music fans, that community is most strongly felt when it comes time to descend on a live show. "I love the music, but actually it's the friendships I've got out of being part of this fandom that make it for me," explains self-proclaimed Muse superfan Helen Rose. "We're just one big community."

Rose is one of several Muse superfans that Rolling Stone spoke to at a recent homecoming show in Exeter, Devon, to uncover what makes the passionate fanbase tick. Hosted by Jim Beam as part of their Welcome Sessions event series, the secret gig saw a couple hundred of the band's biggest fans turn out for a live experience like no other at the Cavern, an intimate music venue in the South West of England.

This focus on community is central to Jim Beam's DNA. The brand's motto, "come as friends, leave as family™," is a long-celebrated belief that you truly feel connected when belonging to a community. The notion is at the heart of The Jim Beam Welcome Sessions, where the communion between audience and artist offers a unique sense of unity via a shared passion for live music.

It's a sentiment that Rose understands all too well. She recalls meeting one of her close friends, Linda, for the first time at one of the band's shows in Coventry, England in 2013, while toting an assortment of baked goods. "I made a huge round of cupcakes to give out to everyone waiting in line," she remembers. "That's how Linda and I bonded—over our love for Muse and cake."

Her story demonstrates that the bonds forged at a live show aren't relegated to what happens inside of the venue. In fact, it's the ancillary moments, like waiting on the line in hopes of nabbing a spot just feet from the stage, where the fellowship between fans shines most bright. Hannah Chandisingh recognized early in her music fandom how special the spirit of queue culture can be. "I got there really early and had no stuff with me. It was freezing cold," she says. "There were a bunch of people in the queue with me in a couple of sleeping bags and they were just like, 'Get in. Just get in the sleeping bag. I'm going to go buy you a hot chocolate.' They just absorbed me, and I've been friends with them all ever since."

Fans coming together to enjoy a Muse live performance at Tempelhof Sounds, Berlin

Muse super fans raising a Jim Beam at the Cavern Club, Exeter

With the fan-centric approach that Muse brings to their music and shows, it comes as no surprise that these bonds are the result. "The fans are everything," front man Matt Bellamy retorts. "That's the whole entire reason why we do this." As cliché as that might sound to some, if you've ever seen Muse play live, watched any of their interviews or had the pleasure of meeting them in person, you'll know that what Bellamy says is true.

Those moments between Muse fans—or "Musers" as they are sometimes called—have also been known to transcend the physical world, with some of them connecting through a series of online message boards that predate social media. Most members of the community fall in love with a Muse song that speaks to them, but for Danny Yeates, the seeds of his fandom were cultivated on these same message boards before he was even familiar with the music. "I started building new relationships with people and started to get insights into a band I had never heard before," he explains. "I've made a lot of friends in real life from joining that message board."

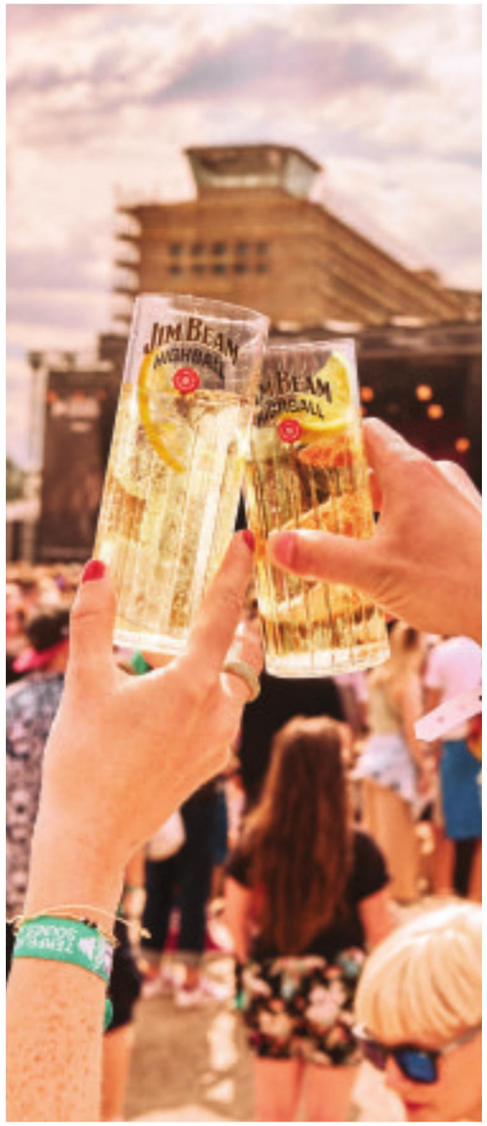
Proclaiming "there's nothing like the sense of community," that Muse fandom brings, Yeates says there were people on the message board who became "gig buddies" and later ended up even getting married. One such fan was Chandisingh, who says she fell in love with her now husband after he "dropped everything" to help her score some tickets for one of the band's shows in Manchester.

Chandisingh invited her future husband to attend the show with her and it was there that the foundation of their union was laid. "I explained that we needed to get there at 2:00am to get a place at the front of the stage. It was that queue experience and really special show where we fell in love and the rest is history."

The band's longtime friend Tom Kirk often questions whether the trio fully grasps the extent of their impact. "I don't think they fully understand what they've done with the Muse community," he says. "[It's hard to quantify] how many amazing moments and times and memories that they've created for people."

A collective love for the band is what brings Musers together across the globe, but it's the special moments that they share amongst themselves that underscore the value of the community they've cultivated. In some cases, these bonds can take precedence over the fun of belting the lyrics to your favorite song from Black Holes and Revelations. As Rose tells it, the music is what brings you to the clubhouse but the connections are what makes it feel like a lifelong home. "For me Muse is all about the friendships and the gigs are the icing on the cake," she says. "[Because of this community], wherever I go in the world I know I am going to have friends there."

> **"I LOVE THE MUSIC, BUT ACTUALLY IT'S THE FRIENDSHIPS I'VE GOT OUT OF BEING PART OF THIS FANDOM THAT MAKE IT FOR ME"**
>
> — Helen Rose



Friends become family, witnessing Muse's return home in Exeter at the Cavern Club

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MOVIES

The Tao of David Bowie

How Brett Morgen's Bowie doc nearly killed him – and then gave him new rules to live by

By DAVID FEAR

A LONG, STRANGE, AND NEARLY FATAL TRIP Above: A frame from *Moonage Daydream,* which was crafted entirely from archival footage. Left: Morgen had a massive heart attack in the early stage of making the film.

BRETT MORGEN remembers the first time he met David Bowie. The documentarian was sharing his idea for a collaboration on "a hybrid experimental film" with Bowie and his associates when the Thin White Duke began insulting his films. "I felt like I was being tested," Morgen recalls. Then someone asked what his favorite Bowie album was. "I said, 'I haven't appreciated anything he's done since 1983.' David replied, 'Touché.'"

After Bowie died in 2016, his business manager, Bill Zysblat, remembered Morgen's pitch and made an offer. "'We've saved everything,'" Morgen recalls him saying. "'David never wanted to make a traditional documentary, so we weren't sure what to do with all this stuff. But you might.'"

That was the beginning of *Moonage Daydream,* Morgen's stream-of-conscious portrait of the late artist as cosmic philosopher and glam trickster that combines vintage performances, rare archival clips, and career-spanning interviews. Or rather, it was one of several beginnings. For the director, the project would turn out to be a five-year odyssey that included a near-death experience, a train-hopping trip through New Mexico, and a radical rethinking of what it means to balance the professional and the personal.

"I wanted to give people a sense of who Bowie was," Morgen says, before taking a deep breath. In the process, he adds, "I also lost my shit."

With access to Bowie's archive, Morgen consumed every bit of media that he could; it was how he crafted *Crossfire Hurricane,* his 2012 look at the Rolling Stones, as well as his 2015 Kurt Cobain doc, *Montage of Heck.* He soon found himself completely overwhelmed with all things Bowie-related. His inner fan was in heaven, but he couldn't figure out a through line. And then, on Jan. 5, 2017, Morgen suffered a massive heart attack. He flatlined for three minutes, then lay in a coma for five days.

When Morgen awoke, everything had changed. "My life was completely out of balance," he says. "I was lost and needed to learn how to live and breathe again." When he went back to screening Bowie's old interviews, TV appearances, and concert clips, Morgen began to pick up on what he thought of as a guide for living a more present life, for how not to let time pass you by. What happened next is the "lost my shit" part: "I woke up one morning and boarded a Southwest flight out of L.A. to Albuquerque. I took a taxi to the train station and decided I was going to ride the rails until I cracked the spell."

Morgen lets out a long laugh. "I know it sounds absurd," he says. "But it's Bowie 101. Get out of your environment. Leave your comfort zone. Challenge yourself. I just had to get the fuck out of there."

It was during that days-long train ride that he'd finally find the through line for his Bowie film: transience. "You can filter every one of his albums through that lens, and so many of his artistic choices," Morgen says. "Normally, people talk about it in terms of fashion and musical genres with him, but you see it everywhere with him: chaos, spirituality, gender fluidity, his approach to songwriting. From there, the script just poured out of me."

Morgen believes the estate is supportive of his approach to the film as "experiential" – as if you were seeing and hearing Bowie's work for the first time. He mentions that he screened the final film for a handful of Bowie's "colleagues and friends" in November 2021, and the response was overwhelmingly positive. Whether Bowie would like what Morgen has done is anyone's guess, though he does say that if the singer were around today, he'd tell him how working on this made him appreciate all the work he did after 1983 a lot more.

Some fans may find its lack of biographical structure frustrating, but Morgen's film best represents his vision of Bowie at a time when the artist's words and work literally saved his life. "When you eliminate the Wikipedia, you arrive at the personal," Morgen says. "I feel like Bowie taught me that. There might be a few things the estate isn't happy to have in there. But they gave me final cut and never told me to make any changes. Right from the start, it was: 'This isn't David's film. This is David Bowie by Brett Morgen. Make it yours.'" ®

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PROFILE

The Podcast Queen of Hollywood's Golden Age

Chasing silver-screen ghosts and Los Angeles' forgotten secrets with Karina Longworth, the brilliant mind behind 'You Must Remember This'

BY ALEX MORRIS

KARINA LONGWORTH'S house is, quite possibly, haunted. This is not necessarily something she has experienced herself, she tells me of her pale-pink 1926 Mediterranean, where Longworth could be found one July morning on the frond-shadowed patio. But it is something she has on authority from a friend who drunkenly stumbled in from the pool one night and heard, in the empty home, a dinner party going on in the dining room upstairs. Since then, the hauntedness or unhauntedness of Longworth's abode has become a matter of some debate. "My friend thinks my house is haunted," she says wryly. "I think he drinks too much."

Either way, there is certainly no one better at reviving Hollywood's ghosts than Longworth. A film critic and historian, she is best known for the podcast *You Must Remember This,* which she researches, writes, and records in a tiny, foam-lined closet off the downstairs office of her husband, director Rian Johnson. In the eight years since she launched with an episode on Kim Novak and a promise to expose "the secret and/or forgotten histories of Hollywood's first century," Longworth has proven herself to be a definitive source on its lore, from the abuses of MGM's studio system to the politics of the Rat Pack. The season on Charles Manson has been cited as one of the best cultural examinations of his Family out there, even though "I didn't come to it from the perspective of true crime," she says. "I came to it through Doris Day."

The skill with which Longworth can connect those dots has garnered her hundreds of thousands of listeners and a cult following that includes Tavi Gevinson, Chloë Sevigny, and Natasha Lyonne, who heard about the podcast and then reached out to Longworth in the hopes of developing a show based on a Hollywood-blacklist episode. "I remember cold-calling her, and I was just totally star-struck," says Lyonne, who has since voiced both Clara Bow and Mae West for the podcast. "Karina sees the underbelly of all our systems, what we're capable of in the reach for power and relevance," says Lyonne. "It's inherently eerie material."

From the beginning, Longworth has leaned into that eeriness. The show almost has the feel of a séance, from the distorted voice of Dooley Wilson singing "As Time Goes By" in the opening to the breathy way Longworth invites the listener to "Join us, won't you?" But the ghosts she conjures, fleshes out, and humanizes aren't just the famous ones. They are also the ones who've been forgotten, buried in the archives of the Academy's Margaret Herrick Library, lost to the fleeting fancies of public opinion, starring in films that will never be seen again because not a single copy is still in existence. Her signature move is to use a subject people think they know about to tell a more profound story – especially if it involves a woman whose legacy has been plastered over by that of a man.

Longworth is 42 and has the heart-shaped face of a silent-film star. On the morning we meet, she is wearing houndstooth pants and loafers, and is sitting at a wicker patio table strewn with 1990s editions of *Movieline* ("How Luke Perry Spent His Spring Vacation"), *Premiere* ("Richard Woos Another Pretty Woman"), and *Ms.* ("Shere Hite Is Back"). She is in the process of researching her 211th episode, which she thinks will be about Julia Roberts in *Pretty Woman,* and which will kick off a season called "Erotic '90s," slated to be released this fall. It's a follow-up to "Erotic '80s," Longworth's most recent season, begun after the pandemic shut down the libraries and archives where she usually turns for research. She had been collecting entertainment magazines from her youth, so she delved in. "If you read every single review of a film that you can find, you do see narratives," she says. "You do see waves. You see a lot of people coming to the same conclusion at the same time."

She picks up a *Movieline,* on the cover of which Drew Barrymore wears pink satin gloves and a sultry expression. "I vaguely remember this," she says. "I definitely remember the narrative, which is: 'She went to rehab, but she's still a bad girl. She's so sexy. Who cares that she's only 17?' "

In an episode of *YMRT,* that narrative would be dissected, animating the past by undercutting any assumptions that it was less contradictory or bewildering than the present. The through line of Longworth's work is her skill for not only untangling myth from reality, but also interrogating the cultural conditions that led to the creation of the myth – and using the contours of myth to do so. "I love a rise and fall," she says. "I love a three-act narrative."

Suddenly, there's a noise from the house. Longworth goes inside to check it out, but it turns out to not be a ghostly visitation. It's just her salad being delivered from Sweetgreen.

IF LONGWORTH'S LIFE were a movie, it would be hard to tell what genre it would be. A sardonic, self-aware tragedy? A coming-of-age dark comedy? Here are the facts: She grew up in Studio City, California, at a time when, she says, "every Starbucks was filled with half-employed screenwriters who'd talk about what it used to be like to work at Mary Tyler Moore's studios. At 13, you could just get a mocha, and sit and listen."

In high school, Longworth took to reading the old-movie listings in the back of *TV Guide*. "I knew that Myrna Loy was a thing before I had ever seen a Myrna Loy movie," she says.

Longworth was inclined to. She grew up with an accountant dad, a mom who was "sort of an artist, but mostly a housewife," and the so-close-so-far feeling endemic to the Valley. When she was a kid, her mom took her to all the rereleases of the Disney films, but didn't pretend that life was a fairy tale. "I definitely saw my mother chafing against expectations and being depressed and wanting to do something outside the home, but not really knowing what it was," says Longworth. When she was 11 and her little sister was four, their mother killed herself. Their father – British and stiff-upper-lipped – was "overwhelmed" as a single parent. Of this period, Longworth says, "I had a hard time making friends and just being a person in the world."

Junior high was a turning point. Kurt Cobain was singing about Frances Farmer. David Lynch was channeling Alfred Hitchcock and Federico Fellini. By the time Longworth started high school, she had fallen in with a group of friends for whom "it was important to go see movies from the Sixties and Seventies. You were supposed to have seen things like *Easy Rider* or *2001*." She took to reading the old-movie listings in the back of *TV Guide*: "I knew that Myrna Loy was a thing before I had ever seen a Myrna Loy movie."

Longworth left home as soon as she could, first for the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, then the San Francisco Art Institute, where she studied experimental film and began making videos that mashed up autobiography with film analysis. Her thesis was about "this probably apocryphal story that Judy Garland had an affair with Frank Sinatra, that I was also loosely connecting to my own [breakup]."

When no one knew what to make of this, she decamped to NYU for a mas-

HAIR AND MAKEUP BY COLLEEN DOMINIQUE FOR EXCLUSIVE ARTISTS USING BUMBLE & BUMBLE/NARS

PHOTOGRAPH BY Ye Rin Mok

Longworth in her home office. “Los Angeles is very good at erasing its own history,” she says. “There’s a loneliness. There’s a lot of isolation here.”

ter's in cinema studies. She helped set the tone of the early blogosphere, writing reviews for sites like Cinematical, which eventually landed her the job of film critic at *LA Weekly* in 2010. She had thought it would be a dream job; instead, she found it stifling to have to have an instant "take" on everything.

Longworth pivoted to teaching at Chapman University in Orange County. She wrote a few books. Then, in 2014, she thought that making a podcast could maybe open doors, even help her get a job at Turner Classic Movies. Over spring break, she taught herself GarageBand and recorded her first episode. She was surprised when, only three or four episodes in, *Entertainment Weekly* mentioned *YMRT*. Once the semester ended, she began doing the podcast full time. "She has an incredible ability to see the big picture and also know exactly what detail brings it to life, and makes you understand exactly what happened," says her friend Amy Nicholson, who took over as film critic at *LA Weekly*. "You just feel like if she's interested in something, there's a reason it's interesting."

Once Longworth decides on a subject, she turns to Google, reading everything she can and then using it to direct her to books, biographies, and contemporaneous sources: magazines, studio correspondence, telegrams, blind items. With the help of her research and production assistant, she organizes information into a timeline ("I can only think chronologically"), sometimes color coding what she thinks she'll use. A single episode can take her months to research and prepare.

"She is the most disciplined writer I've ever met," says Johnson, who has known Longworth since 2009, when she moderated a Q&A for his film *The Brothers Bloom*. "And with any of the topics that she explores, she always finds a personal, emotional way into it." For Longworth, that way in is the point: "If I can humanize anybody who makes movies to the extent that it makes people want to watch the movies, and then the movies help them understand themselves better, that's the ultimate goal."

Four Must-Hear Episodes

All of *You Must Remember This* is worth a listen, but here are some standout installments from Karina Longworth's podcast sure to pull in any new listener

Charles Manson's Hollywood

EPISODE 46:
"The Beach Boys, Dennis Wilson, and Manson the Songwriter"

Charles Manson had connections throughout Hollywood, and in this season — which has been called the definitive podcast on the subject — Longworth picks through his links to stars (Angela Lansbury's daughter actually funded the Manson Family for a time) and the music scene, particularly the Beach Boys' Dennis Wilson, with whom the Family would live for a time before the Tate-LaBianca murders.

Fake News: Fact-Checking *Hollywood Babylon*

EPISODE 131:
"Clara Bow"

Silent-film star Clara Bow may have been the movie industry's first It girl, but thanks to Kenneth Anger's 1959 book — to which Longworth dedicated the season — the Hollywood sex symbol was forever remembered for "tackling" the entire USC football team, so to speak. This isn't true, of course, and in this episode (featuring special guest Natasha Lyonne), Longworth details the brash Brooklynite's real-life exploits during an era of sexual liberation.

Star Wars

EPISODE 39:
"Walt Disney"

Longworth has talked about her connection to Walt Disney and the rereleased movies her mother took her to as a child (including *Song of the South*, a racist 1946 film on which Longworth later based an entire season). In this episode, part of a series on Hollywood during World War II, she looks at the complicated life of the man himself — from the debt he incurred bringing his vision to life to the conservative politics that would "land him on the wrong side of history," as she puts it on the show.

Polly Platt, the Invisible Woman

EPISODE 161:
"Peter Bogdanovich and the Woman Behind the Auteur"

Thanks to an unpublished memoir given to Longworth by Polly Platt's daughters — as well as interviews with them and others close to Platt — this season does what Longworth does best: It shines a light on a brilliant, forgotten woman behind a larger-than-life man. This episode details the film designer's early relationship with Peter Bogdanovich and how she shaped his vision for *Targets* and *The Last Picture Show*.

CHOOSING WHERE to dine with Longworth is a Hollywood history lesson in and of itself. There's Musso and Frank, the steakhouse where Charlie Chaplin and Mary Pickford started United Artists. There's the Chateau Marmont, where John Belushi fatally overdosed. There's Dear John's, where Sinatra and his crew hung out. Longworth had even recommended my hotel, the Hollywood Roosevelt, where Marilyn Monroe and Montgomery Clift had been posthumously sighted; according to her, it is famously haunted.

Eventually, though, she admits that going to Old Hollywood establishments can feel to her like "cosplay." As she puts it, "People sometimes have this idea that I'm wearing a vintage dress all the time. I'm not Dita Von Teese." In the end, we decide on Silver Lake's Cafe Stella, about which she had texted there would "probably be someone that is famous from a streaming show." There isn't, but our sidewalk table does have a distant view of the Hollywood sign, the "H" of which actress Peg Entwistle had thrown herself off in 1932 when her part in a film was cut from 16 minutes to four, as I'd learned while listening to Episode 93 in my haunted hotel.

Longworth is not Dita Von Teese, but there is something anachronistic about her, even if she no longer wears cat-eye glasses and sharp bobs. She's got a fairly bookish quality in person, but after a glass or two of Bordeaux, the lines between the actual Longworth and her dishy podcast persona blur: The *YMRT* version does not seem like a character she's playing so much as a slightly heightened version of who she is, if with more precise and clipped diction. "I have more of a Valley Girl voice when I'm not speaking in front of a microphone," she says.

She is also more of a realist than her subject matter might suggest. If so much of Old Hollywood exists in this "hazy space of smoke and wish fulfillment," as an episode on Garland attests, Longworth resists falling prey to nostalgia by baldly commenting on its appeal. She frequently pits accounts against each other, examines her own misconceptions, teases out which sources are likely to be more credible, and then highlights when the answers fail to reveal themselves. "Most of the time it's like looking for a needle in a haystack – and understanding what that needle looks like," she says of her research. "You are making choices. What if in a moment I was tired and didn't see the most important thing?"

And it's possible that the most important thing just doesn't exist anymore. "Los Angeles is very good at erasing its own history," she says as night falls. "It's the same impulse that caused the film industry to set movies on fire, to melt them down, to save the silver nitrate, which is why most silent films are lost." *YMRT* acknowledges that this sense of loss is as much a part of the landscape as anything. "There's a loneliness to Los Angeles. There's a lot of isolation here," Longworth says.

Just as the best movies reveal something of the human condition, Longworth's work helps her explore something of her own self. Her most poignant season may be 2017's "Dead Blondes," which explores the lives of stars from Marilyn Monroe to Veronica Lake – and our fascination with their tragic ends. It's the season she wrote after her father's death from cancer.

"It was really, really hard for me," Longworth had told me earlier. "I didn't connect it at the time, but as soon as the season was over, it was so obvious to me that it was my grief season." She can see why the past beckons to her, why she's made a career "thinking about the ways that the people left behind deal with the legacy."

But the past doesn't make that easy. Even revived, the ghosts hold on to their secrets. Longworth doesn't begrudge them. "I wish I believed more that the line between life and death was porous," she says. "But I don't." RS

FROM LEFT: MONDADORI/GETTY IMAGES; EUGENE ROBERT RICHEE/JOHN KOBAL FOUNDATION/GETTY IMAGES; © WALT DISNEY PICTURES/EVERETT COLLECTION; WARNER BROS./GETTY IMAGES; HULTON ARCHIVE/GETTY IMAGES

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Q&A

Carly Rae Jepsen

On her new album, facing down loneliness, a decade of 'Call Me Maybe,' and why she's 'the grandma of TikTok'

By JODI GUGLIELMI

PEOPLE KEEP asking Carly Rae Jepsen how she's doing. After all, between the pandemic and the three-year gap since her last proper album, we haven't heard much from the pop star lately. "It's a loaded question," she says, "and my answer has been complicated." Jepsen admits she struggled to adjust to life at home during quarantine after years of nonstop touring and recording, and she suffered a family loss during the pandemic that led her to therapy to deal with her grief. "It caused a lot of contemplation," she says. "Like, 'Where am I? What decisions have I made to get here? Am I happy?' Many of those hard questions you have to face one way or another." From that time of self-reflection, she birthed her fifth album, *The Loneliest Time*. But now, on Zoom, sitting in front of a painting made by her aunt and uncle, the answer to the dreaded "How are you doing?" question is clear by the smile on her face. "I'm happy," she says, later adding with a laugh, "I'm glad I went through those last couple of years – and I don't want to do it again."

***The Loneliest Time* balances real emotions with a sense of light, upbeat energy. How did you find that balance?**

Loneliness is a big theme of this album, and the extremes that come with it. It sounds like it has a negative connotation, but when you analyze your loneliness, it can be beautiful. Extreme events can take place because of loneliness, at least in my own life. Running over to your ex's house in the middle of the night in the pouring rain and screaming, "Let's start this again" – something happened before those decisions! Even though it's a sad title, I feel like it's also uplifting.

What song are you most excited for people to hear?

"Beach House." It's the silliest song by far, but it came from such a natural place. Everyone on dating apps has had a horror story or six. You feel vulnerable and often come up disenchanted by the whole thing. I know some people genuinely join apps to find love, but I'm after the people that are in there to play a game with you. They need to be called out.

Are you looking forward to touring again this fall?

I'm going to tell you the non-polished, honest answer: The reality about touring right now is that it's not for the faint of heart. Flights are delayed, gear is not arriving on time. I'm borrowing someone's in-ear [monitors] from the set before because our stuff is still in Minneapolis. It's a bit of trains, planes, and automobiles to get anywhere. You have to love what you do if you want to tour this year – and luckily, I do. The euphoria of being onstage and being in those moments, sharing the feeling with the crowd . . . it's so worth it.

You have a strong LGBTQ+ fan base, and you're donating $1 from each ticket on this tour to the Ally Coalition. What does that connection with your fans mean to you?

I feel so lucky. When I'm onstage, it feels less about me and more like I'm just a conductor of all this good energy. It changed how I performed; it changed how I thought about everything. I'm trying to create a playful and safe space for anyone to be whoever they want to be. I feel so happy in those moments that I almost feel like I might combust.

What do you like to do in your off time, when you're not working?

I've been on a huge jazz kick, so I can spend an evening just playing my favorite records back and forth. But having those after-sunset conversations with a friend, or more than a friend, where you talk in all directions about everything – that's just heaven to me. I've also made a new goal for myself where I learn to play a new song once a month. That's been a fun little project.

Is there a song you're trying to learn right now?

I'm currently learning "Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas" because I know it's going to be hard, and I want to have it ready by the holidays so I can play it when everyone is around. I'm also learning Billie Holiday's "You Go to My Head."

How about social media? Do you enjoy that at all?

I'm the grandma of TikTok [*laughs*]. I say this in a small personal-growth way: I'm having more fun with it. I only want it to be a place where I have fun. I don't want it to be a place of stress, where I feel like I have to post certain things at specific times. I don't look at it as an outlet of my soul [or] creativity. I've heard artists say they can no longer write songs because they use all their creativity to write a good caption. That sounds terrible. I'm still figuring it out.

Most people fell in love with your music during the "Call Me Maybe" era, in 2012. A decade later, do you still feel connected to that song?

I do, which is strange because I've sung that song more than most people have sung most songs. There was a definite time when I was like, "Oh, my gosh, this song is scary because it's so big" – but I've shed that pressure. Now, it's a really fun moment of nostalgia. The crowd takes over. You can't be in a room with people singing your song and not feel elated. It doesn't feel like it's what people are there for anymore, though, and that's a mini victory for me.

MEREDITH JENKS

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RS REPORTS

The Battle for 'Cop City'

Activists and anarchists have united to fight development in an Atlanta forest – by any means necessary

By JACK CROSBIE

WHATEVER the excavator driver had in mind for his morning, it's pretty clear it wasn't this. It's not yet 8 a.m. on a Saturday in late July, and he's dodging rocks and full cans of rosemary-grapefruit seltzer being flung from 20 yards away, and screaming at the impassive DeKalb County cop next to him to intervene. "Pull your gun out!" he yells in desperation. "Pull your gun out!"

The driver is here in Atlanta's South River Forest on behalf of Ryan Millsap, a real-estate tycoon who's been granted permission to bulldoze a huge swath of trees and put up a soundstage for the city's booming film industry – "Hollywood Dystopia," as the band of masked protesters hurling projectiles have taken to calling it. Millsap's plans cover 40 acres of parkland on the eastern bank of Intrenchment Creek, which roughly divides a 300-acre pocket of this forest that has become a battleground. On the western side of the creek, the nonprofit Atlanta Police Foundation has laid claim to 85 acres of woods, which the Atlanta City Council voted last September to flatten in order to build a $90 million police- and fire-training complex that's come to be known as "Cop City."

What the city didn't expect was that the land would become home to a band of environmentalists and anarchists, loosely united under the banner Defend the Atlanta Forest, who are combating those plans at every turn. The "decentralized autonomous movement," as they call themselves, consists of hundreds of local and out-of-state activists, several dozen of whom live full time in these woods, in a ramshackle network of tents and treehouses erected dozens of feet off the forest floor. By day, the group hosts meals procured through donated food and prepared via collective action, as well as teach-ins on resistance tactics and philosophies, skill shares, guided hikes, and other community events. By night, on the weekends, the scene often shifts to musical performances featuring local bands and DJs – a distinctly Atlanta mix of trap, hardcore, and electronica – plus a bar and substances of every sort, a chance to mosh for freedom and dance in defiance.

Months after the deals with Millsap and the APF were signed, the only thing being built in the South River Forest, it seems, is the next stage of a nationwide direct-action movement, people tired of losing in the traditional halls of power – be it Atlanta's City Hall or America's Supreme Court – who are ready to fight for something different.

"It's not just a local struggle, it's about two competing ways of life," says a DAF protester who goes by the name Cicada. "The people who are destroying the forest live all over the country. People should feel empowered to hold them accountable, to feel like they're capable of stopping this depravity."

The excavator driver is the latest to be caught in the crossfire. His vehicle's windows smashed, he backs it out of range of the assault. But the Dodge Ram truck he'd used to transport the excavator to the site is not so lucky. Clad in camo outfits and black T-shirts wrapped around their heads, the forest defenders are going nuts on it, busting out the windows and spray-painting the doors. The hood is open and someone is ripping at the inside. Another person starts hacking at the catalytic converter. The glove box is open: The truck is registered to Millsap. There is no way that vehicle gets out of here alive.

The cops' guns stay in their holsters, but they make a feeble attempt to get the truck back. One gets on a megaphone: "All we want today is to reverse the truck out. Then we'll leave. Is the truck operational?"

"Fuck you!" someone replies.

"Can you please confirm, is the truck operational?" the cop asks, sounding tired.

"You're going to need a bigger tow truck!" someone yells, and the masks start laughing, still smashing away.

"Fuck you!" the driver yells, a sob in his voice. "Buy your own forest!"

ATLANTA'S NICKNAME is "the City in a Forest." The city itself has the highest percentage of "urban tree canopy" in the U.S., and as its metropolitan center fades into suburbs, dense groves of pines and marshland dominate the landscape. For decades, activists, city planners, and development companies have fought over who owns what, and what goes where. That greater battle is now at its fiercest in this under-siege section of the South River Forest, which DAF has sworn to protect by any means necessary. These activists, many of whom have been living in the park since last November, say that the forest land – which they call Weelaunee, the name used by the native Muscogee Creek Nation, who inhabited it first – belongs to "the people," regardless of who the legal titleholders may be.

Both Cop City and Hollywood Dystopia have been hotly contested at every stage of development. From its announcement in 2017, the APF's megafacility faced stiff resistance from a broad coalition of community associations, environmental groups, and racial-justice organizations. The City Council's final days of deliberation over the project were overwhelmed by 17 hours of prerecorded comments, around 70 percent of them negative, from more than 1,100 individual Atlanta residents. The Millsap deal, meanwhile – a land swap in which the developer gets to commandeer parkland, including biking and hiking trails, while promising to give back space for a new park north of the existing trailhead – is currently facing a lawsuit brought by the South River Forest Coalition and the South River Watershed Alliance, who allege that Millsap and DeKalb County officials failed to perform due diligence in their negotiations. Despite the legal snafu, Millsap continues to claim the land, and has repeatedly sent construction crews there.

The city, too, has not been shy about sending cops through Old Prison Farm – a neglected patch of land on the creek's western side that has largely lain fallow since the correctional facility for which it's named closed in 1995 – to root out occupiers by trashing food caches and destroying tree stands. (The forest defenders, in turn, are now bolting curved strips of sheet

JACK CROSBIE *covers politics, culture, and conflict for* ROLLING STONE.

FIGHT CLUB
Two defenders pose before a burned-out vehicle deep in the forest.

JACK CROSBIE

metal called "squirrel traps" to the trees they build in to ward off police climbers.) In May, Atlanta police arrested eight people after a raid on the site, alleging that suspects had thrown Molotov cocktails and rocks at officers. Who owns the forest, it seems, may ultimately be determined by whose boots are the last left on its ground.

When I arrived at the South River woods for a three-day stay in late July, I didn't have to check in with construction managers, or cops, or anyone who carried the force of the state. Instead, I came to a small gazebo at the trailhead, where the forest's residents had set up a welcome table. A woman who called herself Aggie agreed to show me to the DAF camp, but only after I satisfactorily proved I wasn't a cop. The fear of police is ever present, for good reason. As if on cue, a DeKalb County police cruiser pulled into the parking lot as I was introducing myself, making a slow lap, the cops inside taking pictures of license plates.

Residents have responded to the police presence with a strict and exuberant security culture: No one uses real names, faces must be obscured in photos, and details about life outside the forest are rarely provided in small talk. Instead, everyone becomes a "forest creature," with a new name, a new purpose, and sometimes even new ways of expressing their identity. Forest names are often inspired by flora and fauna – I met "Pigweed," "Thorn," "Bunny," and "Slug." The names are often whimsical, but their intent is clear: to shield the people in the forest from surveillance and identification by the authorities set against them.

These tactics have been honed through a long history of radical organizing, well-represented in the camp. Obscuring features of individuals in a group with similar masks and clothing is the core of a tactic called "black bloc," which has been used for decades by anti-fascist demonstrators to protect their identity. (In the forest, it's more of "camo bloc.") Other strategies – like the tree-sits and camp kitchens – come from activists with experience: The forest has attracted veterans of the Standing Rock, Line 3, and Bayou Bridge pipeline actions, among others.

As in the case of those protests, DAF's activists have come for a specific reason – to oppose the development projects threatening the land – but their political ideology is far from monolithic. There are anarchists, Marxist-Leninists, communists, socialists, and likely every flavor and distinction in between. Many have been involved in Atlanta's local anarchist and community-organizing scene; some worked on mutual-aid projects during Covid, or participated in the George Floyd protests, or helped organize traditional union campaigns at their workplaces. Those from out of town learned about the forest through "movement media," social media, and word of mouth, sacrificing vacation time or their jobs altogether to visit the forest. What unites them, however, is their commitment to direct action: They are here not to vote or petition, but to defend the land with their bodies.

Not everyone in the forest was happy to see me. On my first night, a person in a black ski mask approached to question my intentions, or just challenge my commitment. "Are you the journalist from ROLLING STONE?" they asked. "What do you have to lose here? Your job?" I said I supposed so. What if the cops "fucking shoot someone" they said. "What if someone loses their life?" I didn't have an answer.

Most of my interactions with forest defenders are far more pleasant. As Aggie takes me through the woods, she points out landmarks. There's a barricade set up to block one of the main trails, near a site where police and construction workers had driven in a small bulldozer some weeks before. After a five-minute walk, the trail opens up into a sparsely wooded pine grove called the "living room," which is carpeted with a springy layer of needles on which a handful of people are sitting, chatting, or stretched out asleep. A few tables bend under the weight of heavy steel pots of food (lentils, rice, pasta), cooked in bulk by the camp's kitchen, about 50 yards away, down a hill. It features no running water but does have an ingenious system of bucket filters, standing plastic sinks, and foot pumps in its place. Chores are organized ad hoc. I take a turn at the dish pit one evening and work until someone else wanders down from the living room and offers to finish up – no schedule, no supervisor, no stress.

PARTY POLITICS
By night, the forest community often turns into a festival hosting local musicians and DJs.

JACK CROSBIE

Similar autonomous communities, like the three-week Capitol Hill Occupied Protest in Seattle, have sprung up as part of wider protest movements before, but the DAF camp feels remarkable for its longevity and efficiency. "There's a culture of experimentation and encouragement to make or find your own identity here," says a tall, rangy camp citizen in her early thirties who goes by Candycane. "For a lot of people, these struggles are the only places we can experience that."

In the living room one afternoon, I meet Mac, 22, who says they hail from a tiny conservative town in the Midwest. Mac had quit their office job back in May to participate in the movement. I ask why. "It seems simple," they reply. "Work is hell. The forest is beautiful. The goal of protecting what sustains us and destroying what destroys us is the most important thing."

Wolfqueen, a Black woman in her thirties, states flatly that she's not here for the protest. "I'm aware that it's happening," she says, "but I'm here for the reason this protest exists: to use the land that belongs to us."

As the sun goes down, what the land is used for changes radically. Kids from the city trickle into the forest for semiregular music festivals here, smudging pristine sneakers in the dirt as they follow a trail of glow sticks and LED lights from the parking lot to the living room. A bar offers beers for $3, White Claws for $4, and a shot for $5 – free if you bring the bartenders six pieces of trash collected from the forest floor.

The ad hoc fests are organized by DAF, which has a good bit of overlap with the DIY music scene. The fests represent the movement's attempt to harness its energy and show the city what it will lose if developers like Millsap and the APF get their way. On the nights I'm there, the crowd thrashes underneath a precarious network of tarps, sloshed and euphoric on whatever it's on, stamping dust clouds in the dirt dance floor. Thunderstorms soak shirts and bow the massive tarp roof held up by wooden pillars that have to be adjusted by hand when they're knocked askew by the mosh pit. A tiny, generator-powered PA system punches way above its weight, blasting sound out to the fringes of the scattered tent city. The lineup is stacked with a diverse mix of local acts plus a handful of out-of-town groups. Noise pop, indie, and emo are all represented, but the sound trends heavily toward hardcore and rap – two of Atlanta's strongest scenes – before the performances give way to midnight DJ sets that last until nearly sunrise.

The bands bring a frenetic energy to every set. Becca Harvey, an Atlanta-based artist who goes by Girlpuppy, tells me she played her songs stripped-down and guitar-heavy, at a faster BPM than they were recorded, to fit the vibe of the forest – and also because she and her band couldn't get all their usual equipment into the woods. "It was like, 'Let's just try all this shit out,'" Harvey says. "Even if it was the worst show I've ever played, it was more important that we were able to show people the space."

If it's her worst, I don't notice: Whoever is engineering the generator-powered sound board does heroic work, especially given that they can switch from Girlpuppy's sad-girl alt-rock to brutal hardcore acts like Ambush to an underground rap set like Yung Burdy within minutes. The festival peaks with an unhinged performance by the Detroit act Hi-Tech, best described as a DJ set with two full-time hype men going crazy in front of the turntables. I tap out after that, heading back to my tent, but the party that night rages on until close to 5 a.m.

Shortly after Ryan Millsap's seized truck is set on fire on Saturday morning, a group gathers in the living room to listen to Craig Womack, a former English professor from Emory University who is also an expert on the Muscogee Creek peoples indigenous to the area. The movement has made an effort to bring in representatives from the Muscogee Nation to participate on their native lands. But when Womack sits down, he's flustered. "Sorry," he says. "I'm still a little scrambled from the conflagration in the parking lot." Womack says his theory of resistance centers on nonviolence, but he doesn't expect that standard from every party to a movement. He does expect violence to be strategic. "If you've got a day where you're going to have a talk, and people are coming through the parking lot," he points out, "maybe don't set fire to the parking lot."

There are murmurs of assent and dissent from the crowd. Several people agree, while others mention that these sorts of freedoms are what keep the movement "autonomous." Any group can take any action it wants at any time. Still, the action seems to have consequences: A panel on "urban ecological features" scheduled for later in the day is canceled. (DeKalb County police later confirm to Rolling Stone that the incident is being investigated by detectives and a fire-department arson unit.) During that night's music fest, the burned-out truck becomes a popular backdrop for selfies.

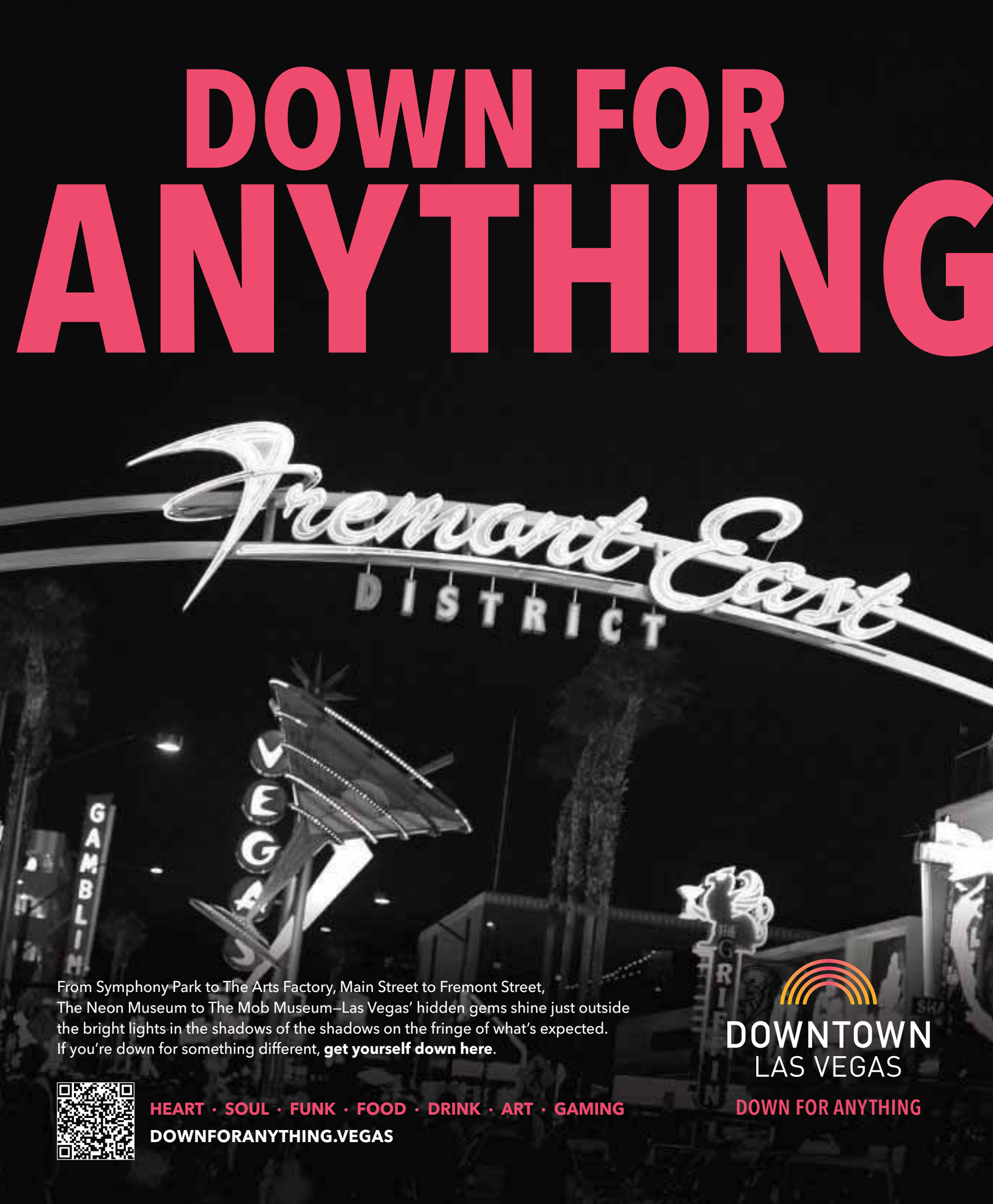
Gresham Park, the closest community to the forest, is 77 percent Black. Its residents will feel the effects of lost park space and increased police presence first. Yet several activists I speak to also acknowledge that the movement has struggled to build relationships with surrounding communities; direct confrontations with police are, by their nature, disruptive. Still, the defenders see their fight as multifaceted and nationwide: Actions may take place in the forest, but the movement crops up all over the city. One defender tells me several of their friends were recently arrested for participating in an action at a construction site operated by a company contracted to work on the forest's destruction. Days later, another source goes dark for hours, then replies to say they'd been arrested for a different action in the city. And submissions on Scenes, an anonymous online message board the DAF uses for updates and news, show banner drops, office vandalism, and sympathetic protests outside of development executives' residences in places as far away as Nebraska, New York City, Orlando, the Twin Cities, and elsewhere.

"Cop City expands beyond this forest," Thorn tells me one afternoon. "It expands beyond Atlanta, throughout the entire country. There are a lot more people [out there] that are down to fight against that."

While the parties and communal gatherings take place on the eastern bank of Intrenchment Creek, crossing the water requires more trust and carries more risk. Technically, it is city-owned land, now being leased to the APF via the City Council's September 2021 vote, and if all goes as planned, the training facility – set to include driving courses, gun ranges, mock buildings, and burn structures for tactical drills – will be open by late 2023. That means anyone caught on its future site risks a trip straight to jail for trespassing, a threat that makes life on the west side quieter and far more secretive.

A good portion of the activity there takes place in what are effectively armored treehouses, which the cops have worked to tear down. A few weeks back, they came in force, slashing holes in the forest-dwellers' water reservoirs. They hired an arborist who scaled trunks to disman- [*Cont. on 73*]

DOWN FOR ANYTHING



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Harry Styles has become a global pop icon. Now, he has his sights set on Hollywood. How does he make all of it look so easy – even when it definitely isn't?

BY BRITTANY SPANOS

PHOTOGRAPHS BY AMANDA FORDYCE

THE WORLD'S MOST WANTED MAN

On a Friday night in New York, Harry Styles put on a show.

It wasn't just any show; it was the first time he performed his third and soon-to-be-biggest album, *Harry's House,* in its entirety. The crowd that May night covered Long Island's UBS Arena in feathers and glitter and tears – a ritualistic skin shedding of sorts whenever Styles comes to town.

Fans noticed something different about the encore: Styles didn't end with his usual closer, "Kiwi"; instead, he opted to finish the night with a second performance of his new single "As It Was," his dance-through-the-tears pandemic reflection on isolation and change. When he played it, the crowd exploded in a way even Styles had never experienced. It left him a bit shaken.

"We came offstage, and I went into my dressing room and just wanted to sit by myself for a minute," he tells me, two months later. "After One Direction, I didn't expect to ever experience anything new. I kind of felt like, 'All right, I've seen how crazy it can get.' And I think there was something about it where I was . . . not terrified, but I just needed a minute. Because I wasn't sure what it was. Just that the energy felt insane."

At 28, Styles has unlocked a new level of stardom for himself. Years ago, he regularly filled stadiums as a member of One Direction, his former boy band. This spring and summer, he's playing them on his own. "As It Was" has become his hugest song yet, setting streaming records and topping the charts in more than two dozen countries, including 10 weeks straight in the U.S. Because he's a star with a largely young, female fan base, many have refused to engage with him as much more than a pretty teen idol. (I don't need to lay out decades of music history to show how wrong of a take that is.) But he can feel the tides change in curious ways. " 'As It Was' is definitely the highest volume of men that I would get stopping me to say something about it," he notes. "That feels like a weird comment because it's not like men was the goal. It's just something I noticed."

Before his headlining set at Coachella in April, I caught Harry backstage, surrounded by James Corden, Styles' onstage guest Shania Twain, and his girlfriend, Olivia Wilde. Later, I took in sold-out shows in New York and at London's Wembley Stadium. The immense love showering Styles was impossible to ignore – you see it in the faces of every fan, whether they've been supporting him for "one year, two years, five years, 12 years," as he says in nearly every end-of-show thank-you speech. Along the way I heard him everywhere, even when I wasn't trying. "As It Was" played in every cab. "Watermelon Sugar" soundtracked breakfast. "Golden" lurked quietly at a London drugstore. "Late Night Talking" blasted at a Brooklyn bar, leading one man to proclaim, "I like Harry Styles. I can admit it," like it was a radical act of self-acceptance.

And while he may be everywhere in 2022, Styles is, at the moment, literally right in front of me, sitting in an armchair of a hotel business suite in Hamburg, Germany, on a sweaty June afternoon. After a dip in the Irish Sea this morning, he flew into town and is now enjoying a day off in the middle of his first European tour since 2018.

In person, Styles looks more like your best friend's cute, sporty older brother than the gender-bending style icon he's become. He's left the boas and sequin jumpsuits in the dressing room, opting instead for a blue Adidas track jacket, gym shorts, and Gucci sneakers. His hair, often described as "tousled," like he's a renegade prince in a romance novel, is clipped back with a hair claw, a signature day-off accessory.

Styles is a kind of millennial anomaly: He plugs his phone in across the room, never once sneaking a glance for a rogue notification. He maintains eye contact as his thoughts unfurl in his often slow, British drawl. He's a bit more Zen, even stoic, than he once was; that goofy, class-clown energy he exuded when the world first fell in love with him in One Direction 12 years ago has naturally diminished. But he's still as affable and charming as ever, remembering details from small talk we had in all the other cities where I had been (professionally) stalking him, and proving earnestly curious about how I was going to spend my time in Hamburg and how magazine deadlines work. (Back in New York, after surprising fans at a Spotify event for his new album, he asked me my thoughts on David Crosby's most recent album, which he loved.)

"My great uncle lives here," Styles says of Hamburg. "He married a German lady, so I have a German cousin. They always used to come and visit when I was a kid, and the only word in English [the cousin] knew was 'lemonade.' I didn't know if she actually wanted lemonade or was trying to say 'Give me some water please!' "

Of course it wasn't meant to take him this long to get back to places like Hamburg, where he'll play for more than 50,000 fans tomorrow night at Volksparkstadion, a local football stadium. Love on Tour, the name for his current trek, was supposed to launch in the spring of 2020, a few months after Styles released his second album, *Fine Line.* We all know what happened next.

Styles didn't get to play live again until last fall, but something funny happened in the interim. While we were bound to our homes, Styles experienced his first Number One hit in *Fine Line*'s "Watermelon Sugar," a tune so

Staff writer Brittany Spanos *wrote the Adele cover story in December.*

STYLING BY HARRY LAMBERT FOR BRYANT ARTISTS. STYLIST ASSISTANTS: RYAN WOHLGEMUT AND NAOMI PHILLIPS. FASHION DIRECTION BY ALEX BADIA. PRODUCTION BY JAMES WARREN FOR DMB REPRESENTS. HAIR BY MATT MULHALL FOR STREETERS. GROOMING BY LAURA DOMINIQUE FOR STREETERS. SET DESIGN BY DAVID WHITE FOR STREETERS.

PREVIOUS SPREAD

VEST BY **VIVIENNE WESTWOOD**.

THIS PAGE

TANK BY **LOEWE**.
SUSPENDERS, **STYLIST'S OWN**.
TROUSERS BY **GUCCI**.

VEST AND SKIRT BY **VIVIENNE WESTWOOD.** SHOES BY **ERL.**

sweet it may take a moment to realize he's singing about cunnilingus. Less than a year later, he won his first Grammy for it.

As the pandemic deepened, Styles ended up back in Los Angeles, where he keeps a home, and moved in with three friends. They'd "go for walks, cook dinner, wash the lettuce, all that kind of stuff," he says, until he decided to use his downtime productively and began writing new material. Rick Rubin's Malibu studio, Shangri-La, was available, so Styles moved in with longtime producers and co-writers Kid Harpoon and Tyler Johnson. "We didn't really know what we were going in for," he says. "It just felt like sitting at home doing nothing might feel better if we all move in together and try to make some music." Before they knew it, they were making *Harry's House,* a revelatory statement that happens to be his most radio-friendly

> "'AS IT WAS' IS DEFINITELY THE HIGHEST VOLUME OF MEN THAT I WOULD GET STOPPING ME TO SAY SOMETHING ABOUT IT," HE NOTES CASUALLY.

album to date. He took inspiration from Haruomi Hosono's 1973 LP, *Hosono House,* which he first heard when he lived in Japan years ago, and treated the songs like they were an internal monologue, traversing a day in his life.

When flying became an option, Styles came home to London. Later, he drove down to Italy in his late stepdad's car with a friend, listening to the jazz CDs left behind. He visited the Trevi Fountain one day, likely wearing his short-lived pandemic mustache, and was greeted with just four other people instead of the usual throngs that surround the historic site: "I felt like every day you'd say, 'Weird time, isn't it?' Then go, 'Yeah, it's fucking insane!' "

He credits his stream of roommates – friends, collaborators – with keeping him together during this time. "I really would've struggled if I'd done the whole thing by myself," he says, mirroring the "Harry, you're no good alone" lyric from "As It Was." After Italy, Styles visited friends in France, then returned to work, eventually posting up at Real World Studios near Bath, England. By the time he set off across the U.S. to finally tour behind *Fine Line* last fall, *Harry's House* was secretly finished.

Now, besides the unavoidable singles and the victory-lap world tour, there are other indicators of next-level stardom: his skin-care, nail-polish, and clothing line called Pleasing

and a fashion collection with Gucci, not to mention his flourishing movie career. He's starring in the psychological thriller *Don't Worry Darling* and in the intimate drama *My Policeman,* and he's nabbed a deal with Marvel Studios to play Eros in at least one of the *Eternals* films. "Everything in my life has felt like a bonus since *X-Factor,*" he says, referring to the singing competition that led directly to One Direction. "Get on TV and sing. I never expected and never thought that would happen."

But today, in a Hamburg hotel, Styles is still trying to make sense of it all. He thinks hard about love, shame, honesty, and the importance of kindness and therapy. And he worries. He worries about how he can be one of the biggest pop stars in the world, the kind who can be everything for his fans while also being a great son, brother, friend, and partner to the people standing beside him.. As everything gets bigger, Styles imagines a life that is smaller. How does the world's most wanted man save the best parts for himself?

SIGNS OF THE TIME

From top: Dancing with music director Pauli Lovejoy at the Forum in L.A. in November; sharing an intimate moment with Florence Pugh in the psychological thriller *Don't Worry Darling;* playing a cop hiding his sexuality, opposite David Dawson and Emma Corrin, in the Fifties-set *My Policeman*.

NEIL MOCKFORD/GC IMAGES

When Styles played two sold-out shows at Wembley Stadium in June, the first thing he did after stepping offstage each night was take a shower. The post-show shower has become a ritual: a hygienic necessity, sure, but also a crucial moment of clarity and reflection. He washes away the screams full of love and desire to just be in his presence. Anyone would be overwhelmed by that. "It's really unnatural to stand in front of that many people and have that experience," he says. "Washing it off, you're just a naked person, in your most vulnerable, human form. Just like a naked baby, basically."

Those post-Wembley showers were especially gratifying. When One Direction, which Styles casually refers to as "the band," played the stadium in 2014, he ended up with tonsillitis on the day of the show. "I was miserable," he recalls. "We played the first one, and I remember I came off, got in the car, and just started crying because I was so disappointed."

Styles' solo shows at Wembley were a reunion of sorts: He had friends and family from all parts of his life and career in the audience on both nights. His mom, Anne Twist, sister Gemma, friends, and his team all danced in the stands next to Wilde and her two young children. Even former bandmate Niall Horan swung by, smiling through "What Makes You Beautiful."

As he's become one of the world's biggest pop stars, Styles' need for privacy – for keeping that "naked baby" self out of the public eye – seems to have grown. Secrecy has helped to fend off constant questions about his sex life, the kind that were tossed his way as soon as he was of legal age.

In the past couple of years, he started to go to therapy more routinely. "I committed to doing it once a week," he explains. "I felt like I exercise every day and take care of my body, so why wouldn't I do that with my mind?"

Through it, he started to process parts of himself he hadn't figured out before. "So many of your emotions are so foreign before you start analyzing them properly. I like to really lean into [an emotion] and look at it in the face. Not like, 'I don't want to feel like this,' but more like, 'What is it that makes me feel this way?' "

One feeling he needed to shed was shame, the kind of shame that comes from having your sex life scrutinized while you're still just trying to make sense of it. Over the years, he learned to stop apologizing for it. He learned he could

be vulnerable in private while still protecting it from the public.

Sometimes, though, he worried he was a "hypocrite" for being so closed off. His shows have become empowering safe spaces for his fans, so many of whom want to share who they are with him. Onstage, he's helped people come out to their parents and facilitated everything from marriage proposals to gender reveals. Separating his personal life from his public one hasn't been a choice he takes lightly. "When I'm working, I work really hard, and I think I'm really professional," he says. "Then when I'm not, I'm not. I'd like to think I'm open, and probably quite stubborn, too, and willing to be vulnerable. I can be selfish sometimes, but I'd like to think that I'm a caring person."

He's found a vague balance through compartmentalization. "I've never talked about my life away from work publicly and found that it's benefited me positively," he explains, perhaps preemptively. "There's always going to be a version of a narrative, and I think I just decided I wasn't going to spend the time trying to correct it or redirect it in some way."

Drawing the curtain over his life has only made everyone who's not behind it more curious. His sexuality, for example, has been a topic of near-obsession for years. He has embraced gender fluidity in his fashion, like Mick Jagger and David Bowie before him, and has repeatedly pointed out how backward it feels to require labels and boxes for everyone's identity. Critics of his approach have accused him of "queerbaiting," or profiting off queer aesthetics without explicitly claiming the community. Defenders feel it's unfair to force anyone to label themselves as one thing in order to validate their gender or creative expression.

Styles, without prompting, points out how silly he finds some of the arguments about how he may identify to be: "Sometimes people say, 'You've only publicly been with women,' and I don't think I've publicly been with anyone. If someone takes a picture of you with someone, it doesn't mean you're choosing to have a public relationship or something."

Of late, this can be contested. While he is everywhere, so is Olivia Wilde. The pair met on the set of *Don't Worry Darling,* which she directed (more on that in a moment), then made a splash when paparazzi snapped them holding hands at his manager and close friend Jeffrey Azoff's wedding in January 2021.

Wilde and Styles have said little about the relationship, and rumors have filled the space. The few months' difference between the announcement of her separation from longtime partner Jason Sudeikis and Styles and Wilde's "debut" (of sorts) as a couple has created recurring gossip cycles about infidelity. Anonymous tweeters acted appalled at their age difference (as if a 28-year-old man dating a 38-year-old woman isn't completely normal) and criticized the director-actor dating dynamic (as if there isn't a long history of beloved Hollywood couples meeting the same way). Leading up to the film's release, blind items created yet another gossip cycle, alleging Wilde and Styles' relationship led to tension between the director and lead actress Florence Pugh. (Pugh and Wilde declined to comment on the rumors.)

More intense and jarring was a corner of Styles' fandom that has made fun of Wilde's dancing or made lengthy Twitter threads and TikTok videos canceling her for bad or insensitive jokes made a decade ago. If Styles is already held up to a high standard, his potential partners are held to an unreachable one for some of his fans.

Styles is not the most online person – he uses Instagram to look at plants and architecture posts, has never had the TikTok app, and calls Twitter "a shitstorm of people trying to be awful to people" – but he's still aware of how those small, toxic corners of the internet are treating the people closest to him. "That obviously doesn't make me feel good," he says, carefully. It's a tightrope he's treading in discussing this. He wants to – and does! – see the good in his fans, but there's no denying that like every large online community, this one has a faction that runs on hate and anonymity.

Even with the boundaries he's set between his public and private lives, sometimes "other people blur the lines for you," he says. There's a conversation he has to have early in a relationship, no matter how weird or premature it may feel. "Can you imagine," he says, "going on a second date with someone and being like, 'OK, there's this corner of the thing, and they're going to say this, and it's going to be really crazy, and they're going to be really mean, and it's not real. . . . But anyway, what do you want to eat?' "

While Styles takes comfort in knowing his whole fandom is not like that, he still wonders about how to respond when the noise gets too loud. "It's obviously a difficult feeling to feel like being close to me means you're at the ransom of a corner of Twitter or something," he says. "I just wanted to sing. I didn't want to get into it if I was going to hurt people like that."

When asked about her experience with his fans, Wilde is diplomatic. Like Styles, she believes in what they stand for as a collective, calling them "deeply loving people" who have fostered an accepting community. "What I don't understand about the cruelty you're referencing is that that kind of toxic negativity is the antithesis of Harry, and everything he puts out there," she tells me. "I don't personally believe the hateful energy defines his fan base at all. The majority of them are true champions of kindness."

ACTING REMINDED HIM OF SESSION MUSICIANS: "YOU GET CALLED IN TO DO A BIT, THEN SOMEONE ELSE PUTS IT ALL TOGETHER."

WILDE ABOUT HARRY Styles and Wilde strolling through London in March. The couple met on the set of *Don't Worry Darling,* which she directed.

STYLES BECAME A LEADING MAN when he was four years old, starring in a play called *Barney the Church Man*. Later, he transformed into Buzz Lightyear in a production of *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang* "because Buzz Lightyear was in the toy shop for some reason." His other early theater credits include: Razamatazz in *Bugsy Malone* ("the band leader") and the Elvis-inspired Pharaoh in *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*. (He would later audition for Baz Luhrmann's *Elvis,* but was deemed too iconic by the director.)

Other than that, acting wasn't really part of his life plan. He liked it, but he found a new rush when he started performing with his band White Eskimo. When they debuted at – and won – a Battle of the Bands competition, it was the first time he felt "the switch": his teachers looking up at him, instead of vice versa. "I think I was just a showoff," he says, with a hint of cheekiness. "I say that like it's past tense."

But as Styles was preparing the release of his solo debut in 2017, he took his first foray back into acting, with a supporting role in Christopher Nolan's war epic *Dunkirk*. (The director said he had no idea how famous Styles was when he cast him.) By the time Marvel recruited him to become Eros, director Chloé Zhao had no one else *but* Styles in mind for the role. Thanos' more heroic brother is portrayed in the comics as an intergalactic playboy of sorts, with superhuman strength and the ability to control people's emotions (a fitting role for the planet's hottest pop star). MCU boss Kevin Feige recently teased more from Styles, though so far, his only appearance has been the *Eternals*' post-credits scene, alongside the Patton Oswalt-voiced Pip. "It'd be funny if that was it, wouldn't it?" he jokes of his cameo.

Styles' role in *Dunkirk* grabbed Wilde's attention as she was beginning to map out *Don't Worry Darling*. He was an early [*Cont. on 72*]

FROM TOP: RICH FURY; WARNER BROS.; PARISA TAGHIZADEH/AMAZON CONTENT SERVICES

THE MYSTERIOUS DEATH OF AN O'JAY

Musician Frankie Little Jr. disappeared in 1979. It took 40 years to find out what happened. **By Brenna Ehrlich**

THIS STORY BEGINS IN 1982 WITH less than half a man – a pile of bones discovered under a layer of February snow, his broken skull smiling up at an adolescent worker behind his family's factory. The bones were far from home, discarded in small-town Twinsburg, Ohio, which got its name because it was founded by twins who married sisters, who died the same day and were buried in the same grave. ■ Broken and nameless, the man became a mystery that would haunt this town for decades, while industries waxed and waned and the teen who found him grew old enough to see his family's business shut down and become a ruin. For almost 40 years, he was unburied, passed down from detective to detective, a puzzle to solve as new crime-solving technologies came on the scene, promising resolutions to cold cases. ■ For four decades, this man remained a question mark, until his identity was revealed by a young detective and a cousin whose family started dabbling in genealogy. His bones no longer a challenge for rookie cops, this man – a musician, father, business owner, and brother – was finally returned to his family, which had wondered for decades why he never came home. Now, there is a chance his story can finally be told.

Above: Frankie Little Jr. circa 1960. Opposite: His skull, which was found in 1982 behind a factory in Twinsburg, Ohio. The remains weren't identified until 2021.

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FRANKIE ROBINSON never believed that his father would willingly leave him, even after his dad vanished from his East Cleveland apartment in the late Seventies, when he was five. Frankie Little Jr. loved his namesake too much. "My dad was a good person," Robinson says of his old man. "He was like any man in the music industry – my mom said that was his downfall – but I know he loved me for sure." Little, a 36-year-old guitarist and songwriter, was living with his girlfriend, Rochella Womack. He did odd jobs to make ends meet, but his true passion was the guitar. Known to friends by his stage name, Brother Rabbit, Frankie had been a member of the O'Jays when they were just starting out in the early Sixties, and co-wrote a handful of songs with lead singer Eddie Levert, including "Oh, How You Hurt Me" (1964) and "Pretty Words" (1966). These days, he played out around the city with his band Fresh Fire, while filling his son's life with music. He bought the younger Frankie drums and serenaded him with rounds of "Hush Little Baby," his Gibson his most constant companion.

The music ended, though, when Little didn't come home – and that day haunts Robinson, 48. The way he remembers it, he was at the apartment with Womack when someone knocked on the door. Womack told the boy to hide in the bathroom, he says. "I remember hearing the door open, and I thought it was my dad," Robinson says. He never found out who that person was; when he emerged, the man was gone. "I've never seen my dad since that day."

For her part, Womack, now 66, doesn't remember Robinson being there or what day it was specifically. All she recalls is that it was warm out and that Little was in a huff because the neighbor across the street, whom he often worked with, hadn't paid him for their most recent job. She's not sure if Little left the apartment to confront the man or if he took a long soak in the bath, which he often did when he was stressed. "I just know at a certain time of night, I was in bed, and I jumped up all of a sudden like something had happened," she says. "That was the night he disappeared and never came back."

The rest of Little's family – scattered across the country, disconnected from Little by that point – was less concerned when they didn't hear from Frankie, because that's just kind of what he did. He ghosted; he went off the grid; but he eventually came back. "The connection wasn't consistent," his nephew Shawn Little Jones recalls. "We'd have to wait for him to reach out and [get in] touch."

Jones just assumed his uncle had gone underground, maybe changed his name to something flashier. He fancied he heard Little's distinctive guitar playing on every record he put on the turntable – that same Curtis Mayfield groove that won him a spot in the O'Jays. Little's cousin Margaret O'Sullivan thought for decades that he would walk through her front door one day, just show up on her plush red carpet with some story or other. Her living room is crammed with family photos she wishes she could show him – his relatives growing up, having kids, and those kids achieving their dreams.

Sadly, O'Sullivan was wrong. Robinson's intuition proved to be true. As it turns out, his father was murdered, a bag of his bones found in 1982 in Twinsburg, roughly 25 miles from his home. But it wouldn't be until December 2021, after the case crossed the desk of Detective Eric Hendershott, that his remains would be identified. From there, friends, family, and authorities began piecing together the fragments of Little's legacy and how, exactly, the freewheeling musician's bones ended up abandoned under a drift of snow.

JONATHAN LAWRENCE – the boy who found the bones – hasn't been to the site of his mother's old roofing-material factory, Laurent Corp., for 20 years. He hasn't had any reason to. The factory burned down in 1992; his mother died in 2008; and even though he technically still owns the land, it's basically just a swamp now, studded with fragrant skunkweed, charred ruins, and bad memories. In the spring of 2022, however, he's back. His wheels stick in the mud as he maneuvers his SUV through a narrow tunnel of trees to 3047 Cannon Road, which you wouldn't know was there if not for the weather-beaten sign. "You can see why we could never get a pizza delivered," Lawrence quips, lowering his Oakleys and squinting into the sun toward where he uncovered a mystery decades ago.

Lawrence doesn't get out of the car when he reaches his destination, a swath of swampy grass surrounded by trees and hemmed in by a line of tony condos. Instead, he points to a jumble of ruins and recalls what he says was a day back in the late Seventies, when he was around 16. He remembers standing on a platform in the mixing room at the back of the building, stirring up adhesive for roofing materials. He was looking out the window when he saw a car pull in – what cops now believe was a 1957 Ford station wagon – turn around, and back up to the edge of the woods, where a Black man in blue coveralls and a driving hat dumped a bag on the ground.

"I'm standing there going, 'Damn it, I'm going to have to clean that up. Why didn't he just put it in the dumpster?' " Lawrence says; as the owner's son, the dirty work often fell to him. He didn't think much of it, though; people tossed so much trash back there that they left the dumpsters unlocked.

This is where his memory fractures. Lawrence recalls going outside that day to deal with whatever the man left behind, but this actually happened later, in February 1982, according to the police report and the local paper. When pressed, he admits that he may have conflated his memories. Lawrence was poking around the trash one February day when the bag split and a skull rolled out. Being young and full of bluster, Lawrence wasn't rattled. Instead, he scooped the skull onto a shovel and brought it in to scare the new secretary. "See the kind of trash people leave behind?" he joked. "She freaks out. Completely freaks out. And calls the police," he says. "Then she tells me to take it and put it back where I found it."

When the police arrived, they discovered the rest of the bones, which they thought might belong to eight-year-old Tiffany Papesh, who disappeared in 1980. Or, perhaps, this was a gangland killing, as Twinsburg Police Chief Don Prange speculated to the *Akron Beacon Journal*. Lawrence claims bodies had been found back there in the past, before his time, and recalls police meeting informants in the shipping area after hours – his mother, Dorothy, serving them steaming cups of coffee.

Lawrence doesn't seem too bothered by the memory; he's had his share of struggles over the years that have far eclipsed that gruesome discovery. But he does shake his head when he points out a white plastic cross, festooned with a drooping fake wreath and an American flag. Frankie Little Jr.'s name is Sharpied across one of the slats, already almost faded away by the elements. "It's not in the right spot," he says, pointing to a tangle of woods several feet away where he says he saw the mystery man dump the bag. Blurred memories or not, Lawrence can still remember where Little's bones lay.

FRANKIE JR. WAS BORN in August 1943 in Cleveland to Frankie Little Sr. and La Verda Stone, who were both entertainers at heart and jacks-of-all-trades for money. His mother died when he and his brother Johnny were young, and they grew up in the projects, living with their father, an aunt named Betty, and a sister, in turn, as the two grew up. Johnny was Frankie's only full brother, but he had a few half siblings and spent weekends hanging out with his twin cousins, Margaret and Rossie Little. "His father knew that he liked to play music and stuff like that, so his father bought him a guitar," says his cousin, Margaret O'Sullivan, née Little, recalling how he was rarely without the instrument. "He was never the type to go out and party. He never had a lot of friends. He was just into music."

While Johnny admits that he himself was a bit of a bad kid, Frankie was studious. "He didn't care nothing about sports," Johnny says. "I used to beg him to play cards. He didn't want to do that. All he wanted to do was play his guitar, write, draw, paint. We lived near a large swimming pool, and he didn't care about going swimming, basketball. He just wanted to play his guitar."

Frankie put together his first band, the Fairlanes, in the early Sixties, and even had sweaters made with the band name emblazoned across them. In the mid-Sixties, the young musician got his big break when the O'Jays held auditions for new members, and he scored a spot on guitar; his first songwriting credit with the band was for 1964's "Oh, How You Hurt Me." "[Frankie] was a very passionate guy. He loved playing his instrument, and we loved the way

"I REMEMBER HEARING THE DOOR OPEN AND I THOUGHT IT WAS MY DAD," ROBINSON SAYS. HE NEVER FOUND OUT WHO THAT PERSON WAS. WHEN HE EMERGED, THE MAN WAS GONE. "I'VE NEVER SEEN MY DAD SINCE THAT DAY."

Research chief BRENNA EHRLICH*'s young-adult thriller 'Killing Time' came out in March.*

LOCAL LEGEND

Frankie Little Jr. was part of the O'Jays in the 1960s. Though no photographs of him and the band survive, Little co-wrote "Oh, How You Hurt Me" and "Pretty Words." "He loved playing his instrument, and we loved the way that he played," says O'Jays lead singer Eddie Levert.

CLEVELAND'S LOST SON

Though Little's remains were found in 1982, it wasn't until 2021 that he was identified. But the search didn't stop. Right: A 2009 sketch made based on the skull. Far right: A 2017 model based off the same piece of evidence. Below: A 1982 headline about the gruesome discovery.

that he played because he played a little bit of the Curtis Mayfield style," says the O'Jays singer Levert.

By then, the band had been gigging for more than five years. The group formed under a different name in 1958 and officially became the O'Jays in 1963, as a nod to Cleveland DJ Eddie O'Jay, a radio personality and the band's onetime manager. By the time Little joined, they'd scored their first hit – 1963's "Lonely Drifter" – but had yet to hook up with Philly producers Kenny Gamble and Leon Huff, who propelled the band up the charts after the group signed to Philadelphia International Records in the early Seventies. The band continues to tour to this day – albeit without all the original members – and was inducted into the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame in 2005. "They could dance, they looked great, they always wore great stage outfits – they were the whole package," says Jason Hanley, VP of education and fan engagement at the Hall of Fame, adding that they never forgot their roots. "They were one of the biggest groups to come out of Cleveland. A lot of their music is feel-good music, which I think is why they continue to resonate with people year after year." Although a fan of the O'Jays, Hanley admits he hadn't heard of Little until recently.

When it comes to the mid-Sixties, though, things get a little murky for Little's friends and family. That's when Little and the O'Jays went to California, where he married a woman named Precious P. Henderson on June 16, 1965, according to the U.S. marriage index. The two apparently had a daughter, but neither Johnny nor the rest of his family ever met Precious or the girl, both of whom have since died. Johnny only knows that eventually Frankie got homesick and returned to Cleveland around 1967. Johnny says the day Frankie got back, two members of the armed service's military police rounded him up and took him straight to a federal building. From there, he was drafted into the Army, sent to basic training back in California, and shipped straight to Vietnam. "He was hurt because when that happened, my father had passed," Johnny says. "I think it really did affect him, to not be able to go to my father's funeral."

Johnny doesn't recall exactly when his brother finally got home, but he does remember the horrific stories he brought back: the booby traps the North Vietnamese set for the invading Americans, the heads on spikes they erected to scare off Frankie and his fellow troops. "He was a survivor, though," Johnny says. "He could take a tree trunk off the street and carve it and shellac it and sell it. He made his own clothes. He was very talented."

The brothers opened stores next to each other in the early Seventies under the name Jay's Deli & Record Shop, not far from an area now known as Cleveland's Second Downtown. Today, it's crammed with medical buildings, but in those days, the neighborhood was a hotbed of Black culture. It was largely curated by prominent Black real estate developer Winston E. Willis, who opened venues like Scrumpy Dump Cinema and Winston's Place Fine Dining. There were also jazz clubs, movie theaters (both adult and child-friendly), and beauty shops. "It was the inner-city Disneyland," says Willis' sister, Aundra Willis Carrasco.

Although no longer with the O'Jays, Little had no shortage of creative outlets, and the neighboring shops were a melting pot of music and collaboration. "Frankie had a little sewing room where he'd make dashikis," his cousin O'Sullivan remembers. "And he'd play his guitar. He was very talented." Jones recalls Little bringing touring bands through the shop to drum up business; he worked behind the counter at his dad's shop and flitted between the grocery and the record store when musicians filtered through. Meanwhile, Johnny kept the younger generation hopped up on sugar and candy – and occupied with a menagerie of pinball machines. "All the neighborhood kids came," he says. "I had the shop painted a loud orange in the front, and I had neon signs in both windows. The whole neighborhood called me 'Jay.' It was a blessing to watch the kids grow up."

All the while, Little was playing music – and falling in love. He took up with an artist named Diana Robinson in the early Seventies and had a son, Frankie Robinson, in 1974. The couple never married, and Little got together with Womack in 1973, Womack recalls. They were a musical couple and performed together often, Womack says, while Little also played with the Fresh Fire. "He was so tough he could get on his knees and play the guitar with his teeth," she says.

Womack was in her late teens at the time, and lived with Little, 12 years her senior, as he moved between two homes. There was a big house not far from Frankie and Johnny's store – with beads in the doorways, bright windows, and red and yellow lights, which always smelled like the jasmine incense Little made – and then another, more modest spot in East Cleveland. Little would make her clothes, Womack recalls, and kept her laughing. "He was funny," she says. "He used to kill me trying to dance, and I used to laugh at him because he'd be getting down. He was a fun dude."

After five years of working side by side, Frankie and Johnny closed their shops, and the brothers said goodbye for the last time in 1976, before Johnny moved to Florida. The next three years passed without incident, according to Womack, who continued to live with Frankie in East Cleveland as he played music and worked odd jobs. That is, until the day Womack woke up in bed with the premonition that something was wrong.

"I couldn't understand why he disappeared off the face of the Earth. That was not like him," Womack says now. She says Frankie left every- [*Cont. on 74*]

PREVIOUS SPREAD, FROM LEFT: TWINSBURG POLICE DEPARTMENT; COURTESY OF LINDA SPURLOCK, PH.D. THIS PAGE, FROM TOP: ECHOES/REDFERNS/GETTY IMAGES; TWINSBURG POLICE DEPARTMENT, 3

BEING THERE

Live music has changed in some unfathomable ways in the past two years – but the best things about the concert experience remain the same. America's top **Cities & Venues** can be found everywhere from Montana to Mississippi

Whitefish

MONTANA

At a summertime festival near Glacier National Park, Americana music soundtracks the beauty of the American West

Thanks to television's *Yellowstone,* everyone seems to have Montana fever right now. The **UNDER THE BIG SKY FESTIVAL** in Whitefish, in the northwest corner of the state, combines the sweeping views that give the ranching drama its grandeur with some of the most vital artists in country and Americana music — all performing on a real working ranch.

At this year's festival, bands like Turnpike Troubadours, Trampled by Turtles, and Midland entertained the approximately 30,000 fans who descended upon the Big Mountain Ranch just outside of Whitefish, a stunning ski town on the cusp of Glacier National Park.

"Montana is one of the last great wide-open places, and the people there are real country-music fans," says Midland's Cameron Duddy. "Anyone who made it out to Under the Big Sky fest probably felt the same way we did — thankful for country music being played in the country."

Event organizer Johnny Shockey, who grew up immersed in the ranching life of Alberta, Canada, launched Under the Big Sky as an intentional way to mix nature with music.

"This is a fun place and an easy sell to come here for vacation," he says. "A lot of people use Under the Big Sky as their experience to go discover other things in the region."

But Shockey also wanted festivalgoers to think about the preservation of the American West. "We have this Western culture that is, essentially, dying," he says. "We have to respect the land."

For songwriter Hannah King, a Whitefish native who performed at this year's festival, it's that very landscape that inspires her and gives her a place to create.

"This is such a beautiful place, but it's very remote. And it's like the whole world's coming to you — the biggest acts on the planet playing right across the street from your house," King says. "It's amazing how I can wake up in the morning and write music in front of the mountains, then go across the road and perform it at Under the Big Sky." **GARRET K. WOODWARD**

BIG SKY COUNTRY MUSIC
Montana's Big Mountain Ranch plays host to one of the most scenic festivals in the U.S.

ALABAMA SHAKING Brittany Howard performs at the Orion in Huntsville.

Huntsville

ALABAMA

Rocket town Huntsville shoots for the stars with the new Orion Amphitheater

A world-class outdoor venue inspired by ancient Roman designs is probably the last thing you'd expect to find in Huntsville, Alabama, but the city's new **ORION AMPHITHEATER** is all about exceeding expectations. Which makes perfect sense for a town that's primarily known for sending rockets into outer space.

Funded by the city's capital plan and a percentage of future hotel taxes, the $40 million, 8,000-capacity Orion is a perfect complement to the fast-growing northern Alabama city. It was also created with the idea of community in mind, something that Mumford & Sons keyboardist and co-founder Ben Lovett — CEO of the Venue Group, which runs the Orion — is making a core mission of all his company's sites. During Orion's design phase, he stressed the importance of building something that operates differently from other amphitheaters.

"There are lots of venues across the U.S. that play 10, 15 shows a year, and we've seen them a million times: the concrete pad with the lawn and the roof over the stage," Lovett says. "And they open when they open, and the rest of the year they're not in use. I was like, 'Forget those rules. Let's look at how the best do it.'"

That idea of making it a unique place extended to Orion's opening weekend, dubbed "The First Waltz," a nod to the Band's classic concert film. There were performers like Jason Isbell, Drive-By Truckers, and Waxahatchee, all born and raised in Alabama, and others like Mavis Staples, who recorded in nearby Muscle Shoals. The closing night was dedicated to local talent like rapper Translee and the Aeolian Singers from HBCU Oakwood University.

"Once I got it locked in, I was like, 'Man, this is what I wanted to show the people of Huntsville, what we're trying to achieve,'" says Ryan Murphy, GM of Orion and Huntsville Venue Group (a division of Lovett's TVG). "It's very specific to the area, and it really reflects the legacy and the future of the area."

The Orion and Huntsville Venue Group also fit into a bigger picture envisioned by a 2018 Sound Diplomacy audit, which centered on the idea of creating an entire musical ecosystem in Huntsville to keep pace with its growth.

"You have a really cool underground punk scene and DIY garage scene and people doing house shows, some singer-songwriter stuff, and the city [is] really helping lean into that by doing different festivals," Murphy says. The city's Von Braun Center also expanded its venue offerings with the new 1,500-capacity Mars Music Hall.

The Venue Group has plans to open a smaller club near downtown Huntsville, rounding out an ecosystem that now includes music stores like Vertical House and Tangled String Studios at Lowe Mill.

It's a long process that requires a lot of cooperation from multiple parties, but Murphy and Lovett note that everyone is eager to collaborate.

"[In] Huntsville, there's something magical about how they get things done," Lovett says. "The rocket program and everything they've done with NASA, that gives them the self-confidence to do things that other people don't do."

JON FREEMAN

Alabama native Deqn Sue onstage at the Orion

FROM TOP: JOSH WEICHMAN; ERIKA GOLDRING

Jackson

MISSISSIPPI

Jackson is synonymous with the blues; it's also Southern hip-hop's best-kept secret

Talk to scene makers in Jackson, Mississippi, like Brad "Kamikaze" Franklin and you'll hear a lot of evangelism about how the "birthplace of American music," as the state bills itself, is overlooked as a breeding ground for hip-hop.

Franklin, who recorded as one half of the hip-hop duo Crooked Lettaz with David Banner, in the late Nineties, names Snoop Dogg, Rick Ross, and the late Nate Dogg — all of whom have ties to the state — to illustrate his point. In recent years, Rae Sremmurd (Tupelo) and Big K.R.I.T. (Meridian) have made moves in the genre, but only after relocating to other cities.

"Talent has never been our problem in Mississippi," Franklin says. And he's right. Mississippi has long been a place Black musicians leave, beginning with the Great Migration that saw Muddy Waters, Howlin' Wolf, and others join millions of African Americans moving north to escape the Jim Crow South. Today in Jackson, where 83 percent of the population is Black, musicians are confronting those same ills, and they're doing it defiantly, wearing T-shirts emblazoned with slogans like "Jackson Over Everything."

"Every other state should be paying homage to Mississippi," Franklin says, "because their music scenes would not exist if it were not for the people who came here. David Banner and I call Mississippi 'Little Africa'… it is the cradle of civilization for Black folks in this country."

Through *Third Coast Radio,* a weekly radio show, and the annual **JACKSON INDIE MUSIC WEEK** showcase, Franklin has focused on lifting up Jackson MCs: blunted rhymer Yung Jewelz, blissful beatmaker Vitamin Cea, street spitters Nickoe and Ant200, and 5th Child, who stomps on a Confederate flag at shows to "get it poppin' like it's Juneteenth."

None is bigger right now than Dear Silas, whose viral hits "Gullah Gullah Island" and "Skrr Skrr" have racked up millions of streams. Growing up in a family that spun R&B, country, rock, and soul records, plus influences like early Kanye West and Pharrell Williams, Silas imbues his backpack beats and verses with a fluid sense of meter and melody.

JACKSON POPPING Rapper 5th Child (above) and the 15-year-old Prentiss (left) are two artists celebrating what it means to be from "the birthplace of American music."

There's also hip-hop-adjacent artists like 15-year-old Prentiss, who signed with Cinematic Music Group (the label that launched Nipsey Hussle and Big K.R.I.T.) after his shoegaze-rap single "Hazel Eyes" caught the attention of Justin Bieber and others on social media.

But singling out one sound for Jackson hip-hop is missing the point, Franklin says. "It's all the things we know historically Mississippi has been and has been narrated to be. That's kind of what [our] hip-hop is. It's something different here than it is every place else."

"The music scene is just continuing to evolve," adds Silas. "There's so many dope artists here right now and so many dope places to perform."

The epicenter of Jackson's nightlife is Fondren, an artistic neighborhood centered around the 300-capacity **DULING HALL**, a dozen eateries, a skate shop, vinyl store, and weekly art-and-music block parties. But live hip-hop is also thriving thanks to nontraditional venues, like Offbeat comics and Conkrete Kickz sneaker store, along with coffee shops and parking lots. Many of the city's up-and-comers perform at **FONDREN GUITARS** for "The Kickback," a monthly series produced by Franklin's *Third Coast Radio.*

That scrappiness and DIY spirit are what keep Jackson hip-hop growing.

"[People] think about the Delta, they think about the blues, and they don't look past that," Silas says. "And I understand that, 'cause we do that pretty good, know what I'm saying? Mississippi is the birthplace of everything — American music, period." **JIM BEAUGEZ**

FROM TOP: 242 CREATIVE; ZACH BALL; RICARDO ARDUENGO/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

San Juan

PUERTO RICO

Affectionately known as El Choli to locals, the Coliseo de Puerto Rico is a rite-of-passage venue for artists in Latin pop

For Puerto Rican audiences, Latin pop concerts are an invigorating, interactive experience, and on the island, no indoor performance space captures that spirit better than **COLISEO DE PUERTO RICO JOSÉ MIGUEL AGRELOT**. Opened in 2004 and located in the heart of San Juan's Milla de Oro, the arena — a spectacular structure that resembles a peaked cap and is known as El Choli to locals — has become a rite-of-passage venue for artists across Latin pop.

From local heroes like Rauw Alejandro and Bad Bunny (who set the venue's attendance record in July) to Colombian powerhouse Karol G, a sold-out Coliseo performance is an affirmation of star power. Reggaeton king Alejandro earned his Coliseo crown last year with four.

"Words can't express what it felt like to be able to share four evenings with the island that gave me life," Alejandro says.

But El Choli isn't only a point of pride for those who perform on its stage. The Coliseo is essential to San Juan's job market too. Generally, the venue hires between 300 and 500 employees per show, and up to 1,000 for special events. "The responsibility of managing such a history-rich venue is recognizing that it's an economic motor for our community," Jorge L. Pérez, the Coliseo's GM, says.

For Univision's *Premios Juventud* awards show, the TV network and Coliseo management hired more than 50 percent Puerto Ricans across all its departments, and about 40 percent of local vendors. It marked the first time the awards show was held outside of Florida in its 19-year existence.

BAD BUNNY at the Coliseo in July, when he broke the attendance record

"Coliseo has a magic about it," says Eric Duars, who manages Alejandro. "It represents a connection with the Puerto Rican public that when they accept you, they show you all their love by singing, dancing, shouting, and enjoying." **ISABELA RAYGOZA**

UP IN DEEP ELLUM Club Three Links hosts punk and jazz nights.

Dallas

TEXAS

Along with friendly rival Fort Worth, the Big D is redefining 'Texas music' by celebrating diversity

Austin's long held the nickname in Texas of "Live Music Capital of the World," but the joined-at-the-hip cities of Dallas and Fort Worth are giving it a run for its money.

Paul Cauthen, who mixes disco beats with country, calls the region a "bed for creativity" that lacks the competition of music cities like Nashville and Austin. "We just want to make something that bangs, slaps, and fucks," he says.

Cauthen and other DFW artists, like Leon Bridges, Charley Crockett, and Joshua Ray Walker, have spent the past decade making their own type of Texas country. "The music that comes out of Dallas and Fort Worth sounds like all the genres you like from Texas all mashed together," Walker says.

Elsewhere, jazz is having its moment. In the Dallas neighborhood of Deep Ellum, the club **THREE LINKS**, which typically books punk bands, hosts a weekly jazz session. MC'd by RC Williams, musical director for Dallas hero Erykah Badu, the jams kick-started a trend. Two streets away, the **FREE MAN** holds its own sessions, along with the **BALCONY CLUB** in East Dallas, **REVELERS HALL** in Oak Cliff, and the **SCAT JAZZ LOUNGE** in Fort Worth. "It used to be the only jam session; now you can find one nearly every night of the week," Williams says.

Dallas music is often shaped by its Latinx population. For 15 years, Roc D has hosted the "Super Tejano Saturday Show" on community-run station KNON, playing a mix of Tejano and conjunto bands like Rey Reyna and Baraja de Oro. **NEW WEST**, **PLAYERS SPORTS BAR**, and **ROBBIE'S LOUNGE** all host live Tejano music. "The good thing about the Tejano scene is Tejanos don't just like Tejano music," Roc D says. "They like rock, country, old-school funk."

At Jessi Pereira's "Paradise" dance parties, a collaboration between DJ Sober and Pereira that occurs monthly in Oak Cliff, Dallas music history is celebrated. "If you drop a Tejano joint or some Dallas boogie [in a DJ set], that would definitely be a Dallas vibe," says DJ Sober. "People would lose their shit."

And showing out goes hand in hand with DFW music, be it at a country show, a jazz night, or a sweaty dance party.

"We're a very flashy city," Pereira says. "We like to be seen, and we like to sparkle and shine." **JONNY AUPING**

The Five New Names to Know in Michigan Rap

The rap coming out of the Mitten State is among the most vital in the country: These five eclectic artists are the proof

GMO Stax

Why You Should Pay Attention: The Detroit teen has lifetimes of experience in his songs, each informed by a gripping narrative about what it takes to survive the streets, from ski masks in the back seat to avoiding snitches. "It's just stuff I'm going through and been through," he says. "Everybody ain't good with storytelling, but it's something that was in me."

Hear for Yourself: "By the Gun" has both an aggressive trap tempo and real talk about karma.

RiskTaker D-Boy

Why You Should Pay Attention: Specializing in high-key motivational music, RiskTaker D-Boy gives you a glimpse into his struggles, aspirations, and how he made it out of the mud. But he also has the humor of a seasoned stand-up: On "2am wit antt," he sneers, "I been beatin' on a brick so much this shit should be abuse/I been fuckin' with them Blues, they will never have a Clue." The 31-year-old has put in the dangerous work, too. "I used to be really wild," he says. "I might have got on the road, driving somewhere with no license, plate expired. You feel me? It's over if they stop me."

Hear for Yourself: "Switches" is a grind-till-you-die anthem animated by hypnotic keys and a titanic 808 thud.

Kookei

Why You Should Pay Attention: For a rapper with some of the hardest, most gore-fixated bars, Kookei has a laughably "soft" name. The Detroit native, whose sweets-invoking nom de plume was inspired by a childhood stint as a bake-sale maven, raps in a hushed, almost-jokey tone, which makes his grim lyrics — about pissing on the opposition's graves when not outright blowing their heads off — sound both seductive and scary. "A lot of stuff you can't take serious. You gotta laugh at that shit," says Kookei, who was inspired by the carnage-heavy one-liners of early Eminem. "That's just me. And I be high as hell."

Hear for Yourself: "Straight Jacket Flow" is a bonkers bombardment of hush-toned swag and bleak bars — worthy of all the skull emojis.

JaiFive

Why You Should Pay Attention: JaiFive makes impeccably produced, lush songs with big, tasteful hooks that split the difference between bedroom-ready ballads and block-approved trap mantras. "If you can get a crowd to mess with your song, emotionally, then I feel like you got that person," he says. "Because a lot of people relate through tone."

Hear for Yourself: "Tell Me You Get It" is a slow burner with a sweet, soaring chorus that's all about Ecstasy.

Chalmaine the God

Why You Should Pay Attention: Chalmaine the God is the epitome of a survivor. Raised in Detroit's rough east side, the single mother of three sings about being sexually abused by a family member at age seven and losing her father and a cousin to murder on "Chalmaine." To heal her trauma, she picked up the pen at 13. "A lot of people out there [are] like me, hiding behind molestation, abuse, peer pressure. I'm a open book," she says.

Hear for Yourself: "Tap In" is a confident two-step anthem about staying true. **WILL DUKES**

OUT IN THE STREET
Unconventional venues are a hallmark of Mile of Music.

Appleton

WISCONSIN

Where a community-supported free festival makes indie artists feel 'famous for a weekend'

Touring as an independent artist, with little to no financial support from a record label or sponsor, can be a dream-crushing experience. But the singers, songwriters, and bands who play the **MILE OF MUSIC FESTIVAL** in Appleton, Wisconsin, each year find themselves reminded of exactly why they chase the muse.

"You go there and you're famous for a weekend," says Jamie Kent, an indie Nashville songwriter. "Mile of Music reaffirms that you're not crazy — that all the blood, sweat, and sacrifice of being an artist are worth it."

For four days every August, hundreds of music acts overtake the eastern-Wisconsin city of Appleton (population: 75,644) to entertain the more than 80,000 concertgoers that Mile of Music attracts. It's a number that has grown exponentially through word-of-mouth since the festival's inception in 2013.

"We've let it evolve organically," says Dave Willems, co-founder of Mile of Music and owner of the Gibson Music Hall in downtown Appleton. "Our goal since the beginning was to figure out a way to manage the growth and expectations by letting the event evolve on its own, and that's turned out to be the way to go, because it hasn't gotten too crazy-commercial."

With a keen focus on booking only rising talent — those mostly unknown on a national scale — Mile of Music aims to help artists boost their career trajectory. In doing so, the festival catches stars before they explode: Sturgill Simpson, Nikki Lane, Milk Carton Kids, Lilly Hiatt, Aaron Lee Tasjan, and Langhorne Slim all played the event early on.

On the ground, the festival itself is a whirlwind of fans, performers, and unconventional venues. Artists play in the streets in front of thousands, in intimate clubs holding 100, or even in the tiny corner of a local business that seats 10. At the 2022 Mile of Music, acts ranged from psychedelic juggernaut DeeOhGee and Americana songwriter Joy Clark to Prohibition swingers the Gentlemen's Anti-Temperance League and indie rockers Willis.

MEASURING MUSIC
Appleton's festival is held in 40 venues on a mile-long street.

Developing a roster "is fun and challenging. Sometimes an agent will want to send their entire roster, but we can't take everybody," Ian Thompson, talent booker for Mile of Music, says. "We also want to make sure we're inclusive to women, Black, and LGBTQ+ artists — it's very important to us to put those musicians on our stages."

In the age of sky-high ticket prices and VIP packages, the Mile of Music business model is a curious one: The festival is entirely free.

"We never want live music to feel like a commodity. Live music should feel like an experience," Willems says.

But that doesn't mean artists who play in Appleton don't make money. Mile of Music pays the performers through money underwritten by community sponsors: local companies, foundations, couples, and individuals who band together to cover the cost. Artists are given free lodging, as well as food and beverages, and benefit from Mile of Music's "Artist Care Program." Started in 2015, the campaign shines a light on Appleton businesses, which provide musicians with complimentary, on-site services like dental care, hearing screenings, photo shoots, and chiropractic care.

"The community really jumps in and supports these artists," Thompson says. "It's about making a difference and being a complete game changer in how artists are treated and how they develop."

"The driving force behind this entire thing," says Willems, "is to create this environment and platform of soul-enriching experiences for these artists — not soul-crushing."

According to Kent, who's played Mile of Music seven times, the plan is working.

"Places like Appleton are the fuel that keeps all of us 'middle class' musicians going," he says. "When your music truly resonates with folks, it makes you think and hope that maybe someday it could feel like that everywhere you play." **GARRET K. WOODWARD**

OPPOSITE PAGE, FROM TOP, LEFT TO RIGHT: VICIOUS VELMA/@VICIOUS_VELMA; COURTESY OF KOOKE!; MADISON FALCONER/@MATTROLLTHATBACK; TANDBFILMS/YOUTUBE; COURTESY OF CHALMAINE THE GOD; COURTESY OF RISKTAKER D-BOY. THIS PAGE, FROM TOP: LARRY RADLOFF; GRAHAM WASHATKA

THE LAST HONKY-TONK Sarah Gayle Meech performs regularly at Robert's.

Nashville

TENNESSEE

As Nashville continues to change at lightning speed, Robert's Western World is carrying the torch for classic country music

Brennen Leigh was visiting Nashville about a decade ago when the Minnesota-raised songwriter wandered into **ROBERT'S WESTERN WORLD**, a neon-lit honky-tonk in Nashville's quickly evolving Lower Broadway entertainment district. Inside Robert's, however, time stood still. Fried bologna sandwiches sizzled on the flattop, Pabst Blue Ribbon cans lined the bar, and twangy country music filled the narrow room.

"The band was playing Marty Robbins and classic country I really liked," Leigh says. "I thought, 'Well, this is heaven.'"

Little has changed at Robert's since then. Located amid a sea of party buses, nightclubs branded after contemporary stars like Jason Aldean, and cover bands playing Journey's "Don't Stop Believin'," Robert's Western World serves as a stubborn symbol of history and traditionalism in a city that's become defined by aggressive development.

Joshua Hedley, who has performed consistently at Robert's for 17 years, says people come to the club for that reliability. "They know what they're going to get," he says. "They're going to get old Nashville, a real honky-tonk experience."

Robert's Rhinestone Western Wear opened circa 1992 as a boot-and-clothing store — boots still line the walls today — but the shop gradually transformed into a music venue that fostered influential country bands like BR5-49. By the time current owner JesseLee Jones took over in 1999, the bar had cemented its status as a honky-tonk haven. It's the type of place you make a pilgrimage to.

Emily Ann Jones, Robert's general manager and Jones' wife, carefully presides over her husband's preservationist vision. When a food rep tried to upgrade the bar's ketchup to a trendy new brand, she was aghast. "I was like, 'Oh, no, what is this?'" she says. "We can't do fancy ketchup. We're Robert's!"

She's also regularly fielding, and turning down, offers to open new locations — in Texas, Las Vegas, Nashville's airport. According to Jones, any offshoot can't be called Robert's Western World. "There's only one original," she says.

That one-of-a-kind reputation is why rock stars like Sting and Joe Walsh all make a point to stop by when in town, and why Nashville hitmakers like Dierks Bentley remain regulars. But it's the bar's sturdy rotation of world-class musicians — from Hedley and Leigh to Sarah Gayle Meech and Jones' long-running group Brazilbilly — that keeps the heart of Robert's beating, even as gentrification erases some of Nashville's musical history.

"All these legendary places are going to get forced out," says Hedley, who paid tribute to Robert's by pressing his new album, *Neon Blue,* in bologna-colored vinyl. "Jesse is never going to allow that to happen to Robert's. It's nice to know it's always going to be there." **JONATHAN BERNSTEIN**

NEON BOOT Robert's first opened as a boot-and clothing store.

Lititz

PENNSYLVANIA

Why touring superstars from Justin Bieber to Eric Church are flocking to Pennsylvania's Amish country

Eric Church was rehearsing for his first "in the round" tour last summer when his manager, John Peets, noticed a major flaw in the stage design: Whenever the country-music star tried to get closer to the fans, he disappeared from view.

"When he approached the pit on the end, I realized the sight lines were no good," Peets says. "I was losing him."

Were Church rehearsing in an arena he had rented out somewhere in the country — the norm for touring artists — making such pivotal changes to the stage could take weeks. But Church was at **ROCK LITITZ**, a cutting-edge production and rehearsal facility tucked away in Pennsylvania's Amish country. A 96-acre campus with two rehearsal studios and a series of "pod" buildings, Rock Lititz is staffed by live-music professionals who've spent much of their existence backstage, on tour buses, or hanging from lighting trusses. It's also home to a slew of on-site vendors, from audio and effects experts to touring pioneers Clair Global and stage designers Tait.

BLANK CANVAS Rock Lititz's stages can be used for rehearsals and to film music videos.

When Peets recognized the problem with Church's stage, Tait engineers were able to make structural adjustments almost overnight.

That reputation for efficiency has made Rock Lititz a go-to destination for today's stars. Justin Bieber, Ariana Grande, and Beyoncé have all rehearsed there — Bieber wandered into town to mingle with locals at a diner — while other artists, like Phish and Sammy Hagar, utilized the soundstages to livestream concerts or film music videos.

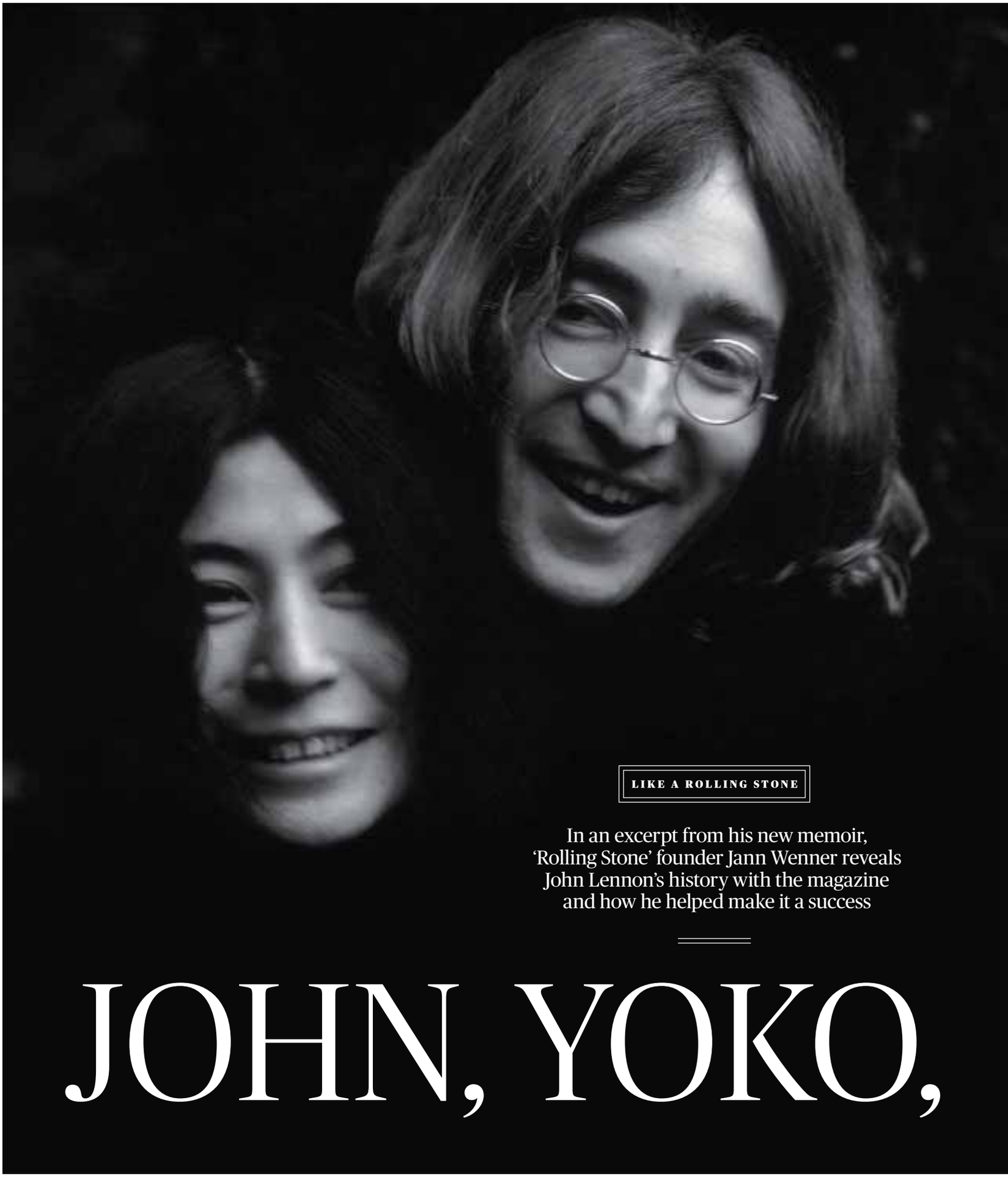
"We're meeting a need that the industry didn't even know it had yet," says Andrea Shirk, president and CEO of Rock Lititz. "We created an environment that has been thoughtful for crew, artist, and management. We've brought efficiency and comfort to each of them."

Rock Lititz puts a healthy emphasis on relaxation too. The campus includes a gym, bike shop, craft brewery, and hotel. On the short end, an artist's crew lives there for five days, but rehearsals for stadium tours can have them in Lititz for up to seven weeks.

"Everyone on my team has worked on the road. We recognize that rehearsals are a hard time," Shirk says. "We want this to be the live-entertainment resort." **JOSEPH HUDAK**

FROM LEFT: COURTESY OF ROBERT'S WESTERN WORLD, 2; COURTESY OF ROCK LITITZ

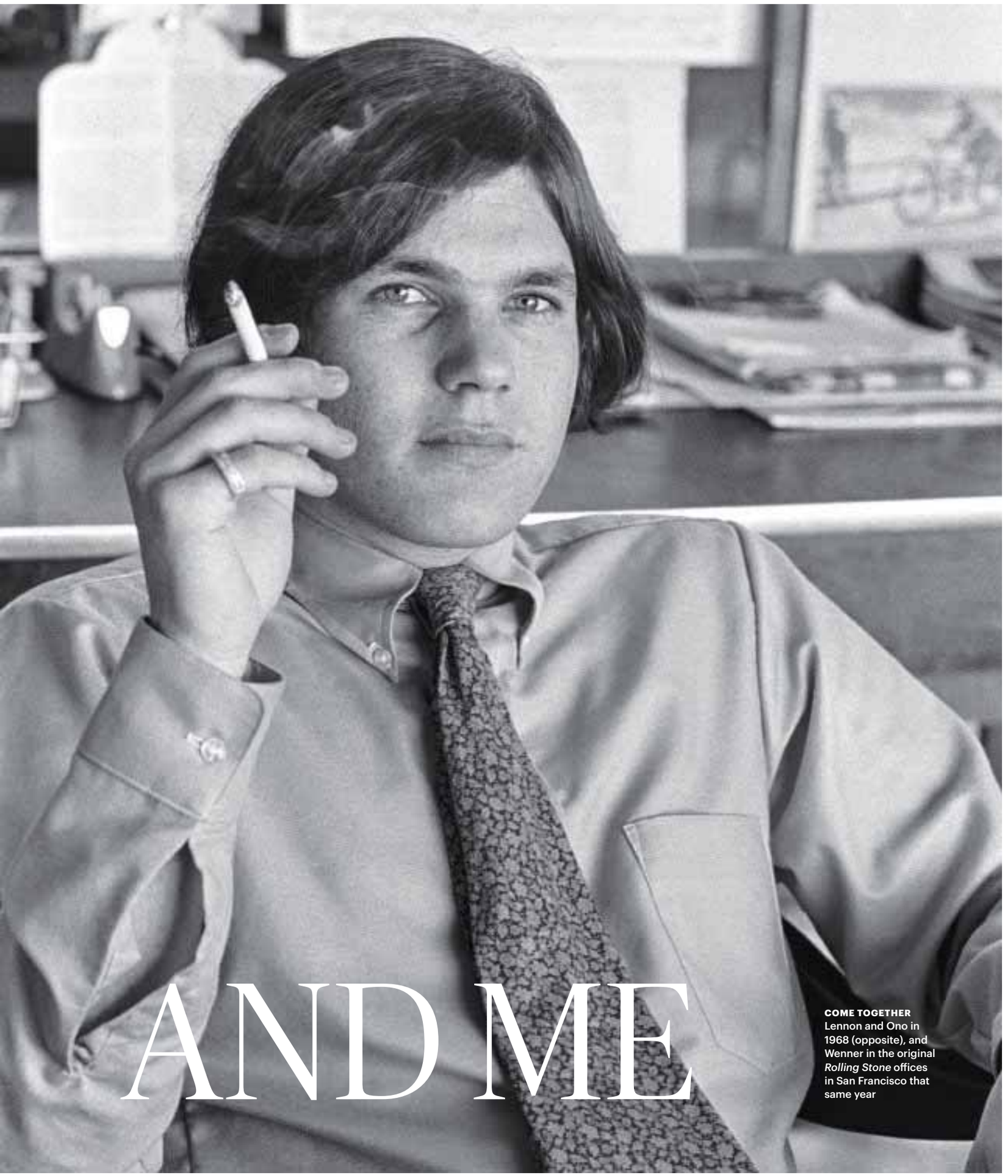
The blues. It's still red-hot in Mississippi.
Hey, hey, the blues is more than all right here in Mississippi. Just a stone's throw from the legendary crossroads, you can catch performances from living legends and young sensations. And you can get deep down into the roots of American music at the B.B. King Museum and Delta Interpretive Center, the Delta Blues Museum, and GRAMMY Museum® Mississippi. Find your rhythm at **VisitMississippi.org/Blues**.
#WanderMS
VISIT MISSISSIPPI
wanderers welcome
Super Chikan | IP Casino | Biloxi, Mississippi



LIKE A ROLLING STONE

In an excerpt from his new memoir, 'Rolling Stone' founder Jann Wenner reveals John Lennon's history with the magazine and how he helped make it a success

JOHN, YOKO,



AND ME

COME TOGETHER Lennon and Ono in 1968 (opposite), and Wenner in the original *Rolling Stone* offices in San Francisco that same year

JANN WENNER FOUNDED "ROLLING STONE" in the fall of 1967, when he was a 21-year-old UC Berkeley dropout working out of a tiny San Francisco loft. One of his main goals was to pull the curtain back on the most fascinating cultural and political figures of our time and reexamine their inner lives. But Wenner's own life has remained mostly a mystery to the readers, even as ROLLING STONE became one of the most respected and widely read magazines in America. That's going to change Sept. 13 with the release of his memoir, *Like a Rolling Stone*. ¶ The book offers readers an intimate portrait of Wenner's life and times as the driving force behind ROLLING STONE – and examines its many ups and downs over the past five decades. He opens up about his private family life and close friendships with the likes of Mick Jagger, Bob Dylan, Bono, Yoko Ono, Bette Midler, and Bruce Springsteen. Wenner also goes into frank detail for the first time about the dire health issues that plagued him in recent years and his difficult decision to sell ROLLING STONE to PMC in 2017. ¶ In this exclusive excerpt, he looks back at his relationship with John Lennon. It began with the very first issue of the magazine, when a still from Lennon's movie *How I Won the War* ran on the cover, and continued the following year when the magazine ran nude photos of Lennon and Ono from their *Two Virgins* LP that had been banned in stores around the world, resulting in ROLLING STONE's first significant mainstream press. "Print a famous foreskin," Wenner wrote in the next issue, "and the world will beat a path to your door." ¶ Wenner breaks down how he won Lennon's trust after the nude photos ran and persuaded him to sit for a deeply personal interview in which he spoke about the creation of many of his most beloved songs and the real reason the Beatles broke up. It was the start of a long relationship between Lennon and ROLLING STONE that culminated in a 1980 nude cover shoot by Annie Leibovitz, taken just hours before he was murdered by a deranged fan. ¶ Wenner's relationship with Lennon and Ono started in 1970, when they stopped by the ROLLING STONE offices to introduce themselves.

"HI, HI. SO, THE THING IS, you see, that we, John and Yoko, too, are in San Francisco, and we're coming to see you." It was Yoko on the phone, speaking in her staccato whisper. It was late-spring 1970. Twenty minutes later, John Lennon was striding down the hall of the ROLLING STONE offices in a green military shirt. I was nervous, trying to be in the moment. Something about him seemed without guile. Suddenly, he was standing next to me. Everyone was up from their desks, dead silent, at a standstill. I showed John and Yoko around and introduced them to the staff one at a time. Meet John Lennon. The real, living, breathing John Lennon.

John had brought me *The Primal Scream,* a book by Dr. Arthur Janov, a psychotherapist who treated patients in group therapy by trying to regress them to infancy and scream the pain out. John had inscribed it:

> DEAR JANN,
> *After many years of searching – tobacco-pot-acid-meditation-brown-rice you name it – I am finally on the road to freedom and being REAL + STRAIGHT. I hope this book helps you as much as it did for Yoko + me. I'll tell you the "true story" when we're finished.*
> LOVE, JOHN + YOKO

We had lunch at Enrico's, a sidewalk bistro in North Beach where I was a regular. John was a constant talker. Yoko would punctuate his sentences with a "Yes, yes" or some little bit of emphasis. I was uncomfortable with the harsh way that John refused an autograph seeker: "Can't you fucking see that I'm eating?"

John had never seen the documentary *Let It Be*. My wife, Jane, and I took them to an afternoon showing in a nearly empty theater, sitting together in silence. The movie so obviously forecast the Beatles' impending breakup – you could see them coming apart right in front of your eyes. John said nothing. When we walked out, the four of us stood on the sidewalk, arms around each other in a huddle. John cried, and then all of us joined in.

We had a great dinner at my favorite Italian restaurant, Adolph's, just two couples out on a Saturday night. Yoko had spent some childhood years in San Francisco, so we drove around and did a lot of sightseeing. The next weekend we visited with them at their rented mansion in Beverly Hills. They lived in one room hung with weavings, incense burning and candles lit. John agreed to give me the interview – he was ready to tell his story of the Beatles.

When John and Yoko got back to London, soon after their visit to me, they recorded his first solo album, *John Lennon/Plastic Ono Band*. I got letters from him, addressed to me in "San Francis-cow, Californiar," with the W of my last name illustrated as butt cheeks. Inside one was a postcard of a dominatrix spanking somebody with a horse crop, wishing us all Merry Christmas. Another letter read, "From a man wot once met Elvis." That one had a page torn from a porn paperback on which he had written, "This is John and Yoko's Christmas Message." He would be in New York in early December for the release of the album, and ready for our interview.

There was so much in the Beatles' history that we knew, but in fact, we knew very little. They had lived in a well-guarded world, and now a clumsy and awkward breakup was underway, with no explanation other than who might have had the idea or said it first. I made a list of songs that I was curious about how and why they were written. "A Day in the Life" – Who wrote what parts? What does this or that imagery in their songs refer to? How did the McCartney and Lennon partnership work? I made handwritten notes for questions on a yellow legal pad, a habit I picked up from my dad.

Excerpted from LIKE A ROLLING STONE, *by Jann S. Wenner. Copyright © 2022. Available from Little, Brown and Company.*

Annie Leibovitz, who had little experience with something so important, offered to travel on a youth fare and stay with friends so she could photograph John and Yoko. She begged for the chance and agreed that I would own the negatives. Deal! When I met her at the airport, she was carrying nearly a hundred pounds of equipment. She turned down my offer to help with it. Yoko told her that she and John were so impressed that I had let someone like her – she was still in school – shoot them, when they were used to the most famous photographers in the world. They didn't treat her like a kid. Right away, John put her at ease, just as he did with me at our first meeting.

John and Yoko referred to themselves in the third person as Liz and Dick – Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton – whenever I went out with them. One day they were in a loft with a small camera crew making *Up Your Legs Forever*, a Yoko project in which they filmed more than 300 people's naked backsides from the waist down. I was having lunch with Tom Wolfe, and brought him to the studio, dressed to his toe tips as usual. Annie was there, shooting. Tom de-

BY JANN S. WENNER

HOW LENNON HELPED DEFINE 'ROLLING STONE'

▲ **THE FIRST ISSUE**
Lennon was on the cover of the first issue of *Rolling Stone* for his starring role in the dark satire *How I Won the War.*

▼ **TWO VIRGINS**
When Lennon and Ono released *Two Virgins,* the record was banned all over the country. Wenner put the album art on the cover of the magazine.

▲ **AVANT GARDE**
Ono and Lennon were filming hundreds of models' naked backsides when Wenner introduced them to the writer Tom Wolfe.

▶ **LENNON REMEMBERS**
After the breakup of the Beatles, Lennon sat with Wenner for what became one of the most famous interviews in the magazine's history.

clined to strip; I would only do it with my underpants on. I'm the one in the navy-blue jockey shorts.

Our interview took place in the paneled boardroom of Allen Klein, who managed Apple Records in those days, in addition to Phil Spector. "Oh, you've got notes and all that," John said. "Well, we have to get right to it, don't we? Give me the paper to doodle on. Where to start? Don't be shy."

John took charge. It was to be more about what he wanted to say than what I wanted to ask. I didn't expect the intensity of his responses, his anger and bitterness about so many things, from childhood and the teachers who didn't recognize his talent and potential genius to the rejection that had been laid on Yoko by his fellow Beatles, the fans, and the popular press. John spoke in argumentative, sometimes harsh tones. I think it came from his Liverpool upbringing. He could veer quickly into anger. He needed to fight back, to be paid attention to. He also had an unerring sense of humor, the sharpness of it overwhelming any need to be polite or kind.

John talked about his early days in London when the Beatles and the Stones ruled the nightlife; his ongoing friendship with Mick; meeting Bob Dylan; his LSD trips; songwriting with Paul; his favorite songs; vacationing with Brian Epstein, their gay manager; his love for the poet Chuck Berry. There was also a lot of myth shattering. "The Beatles tours were like [Fellini's] *Satyricon*. We had that image, but the tours were something else . . . full of junk and whores and who the fuck knows what." But what got the most attention was what he said about Paul. They were in a battle for control of the Beatles business, with Allen Klein facing off with McCartney's in-laws, the Eastman family, father and son, both tough entertainment lawyers. John was respectful of Paul's talents and the partnership they had shared. But it was a public divorce, and he had some pretty nasty stuff to say.

John was putting out his first solo album, an extraordinary revelation about himself. No one at the time made an album that intimate. Certainly no one so famous would dare to. It was painful in many parts, chilling and disturbing. To best understand the interview, you should listen closely to that album . . . and vice versa. The album was stunning. One of his greatest works. He was on a mission to tell the truth. Throughout his life, John had a desperate need to be a truth teller. He never had been allowed to say what he felt when he was a Beatle, and having kept so much of it hidden, had had enough. He was ready to explode, unleashed through therapy and his new album. He explained in the interview that he had stopped writing about outside situations and stories, and now wrote about himself. He was in search of his truest self, and in search of peace and love. The interview, along with the album, was an epitaph for the Beatles and their special world, one that we had all wanted to live in:

> *The dream is over. What can I say? The dream is over, yesterday.*
> *I was the dream weaver, but now I'm reborn.*
> *I was the Walrus, but now I'm John. And so, dear friends,*
> *You just have to carry on – the dream is over.*

In the interview, he said to me, "I'm not just talking about the Beatles, I'm talking about the generation thing. It's over, and we gotta – I have to personally – get down to so-called reality." What a dream it had been. But if it was a dream, why has it never been forgotten? How many end-of-the-Sixties moments were there going to be? The last question I asked was, "Do you have a picture of 'When I'm Sixty-Four'?" He replied, "I hope we are a nice old couple living off the coast of Ireland . . . looking at our scrapbook of madness."

Annie had a wonderful session with them. John wore bib overalls with a small American flag sewn on the front. He looked like a working man, especially with the round wire-frame glasses, the kind that were issued by the British National Health Service. When we got back to San Francisco, I looked at Annie's contact sheets. She had many good photos, but nothing stopped me until I got to a sheet of head shots. It was just one frame – I saw it immediately. He is thinking. It's very private. There is no mask. It's a mystery. She had been using one of her cameras to take a light-meter reading; he gave her a quick look, and in that moment, she snapped the shutter for the aperture test. It was an accident, a simple twist of fate. I called the interview "Lennon Remembers," after the memoir that had just been published, *Khrushchev Remembers*. I liked the direct echo with Lenin and couldn't think of anything better. Because of his anger at the time, he focuses on the dark side. He is describing the inside of a never-seen, sealed-off world. Imperfect and incomplete as the interview was, it stands as Lennon's memoir of the Beatles. The piece hit front pages: "The End of the Beatles!" "*Satyricon,* Lennon Claims!" "I Don't Believe in Beatles, Says Lennon" "I Broke Up, Not Paul" – banner headlines for days in England, splashed on every newsstand, and throughout the world.

Paul was hurt the most. In a later ROLLING STONE interview, he said, "I sat down and pored over every little paragraph, every sentence. And at the time I

PREVIOUS SPREAD, FROM LEFT: SUSAN WOOD/GETTY IMAGES; © THE BARON ALAN WOLMAN COLLECTION/ROCK & ROLL HALL OF FAME. THIS PAGE: ANNIE LEIBOVITZ

"I'm sure John would have liked to take back some of what he said. But it was all truth, his truth, and to read it is to know that and to know John Lennon."

thought it's me . . . That's just what I'm like. He's captured me so well. I'm a turd." I had an awkward relationship with Paul for years because I was the handmaiden to this "last testament" of John's. I'm sure John would have liked to take back some of what he said. He started calling the interview "Lennon Regrets." But it was all truth, his truth, and to read it is to know that and to know John Lennon.

ROLLING STONE was more visible than ever, once again because of John and Yoko. We published the interviews as a book the following fall, against John's wishes. It was not a legal or financial issue, as I had the clear right to do so. I suspect John had not expected the blowback from the interview. He had hurt and disparaged people he knew and who had helped him. Later he said, "It's just me shooting my mouth off. I'll say anything. I can't even remember it."

To refuse the wishes of someone who had conferred an unquantifiable recognition on us, through the status of his own legitimacy, tore me apart. We had been given a sanctified role in a sacred ritual called the Beatles. It made me sick to feel as if I was "betraying" John. He accepted it but wouldn't talk to me. His relationship with ROLLING STONE remained, which was a comfort. He signed off his later letters to me with "Lennon remembers!" It was playful, and I took it as a sign of reconciliation.

Although John had been angry, we remained allies, stayed in touch, and worked together till the end. He sent me a letter thanking me for the magazine's later support in his immigration battles.

> DEAR JANN,
> Got yer note. Re/read it on the 7th! Am leaving for the snow on the 8th.
> You're reading this on the . . . 10th/11th? (in S.F.)?
> . . . A simple twist of f.f.f.faith!
> we're pretty much lost in Babyland . . . thanx for the immigration,
> lennon remembers! love y dove
> hi to jane
> happy new now!
> JOHN

We had done that foundational interview in New York City on Dec. 8, 1970. Ten years later, to the day, John was dead.

IN THE DECADE that followed the "Lennon Remembers" interview, ROLLING STONE moved to New York, and became the most important music magazine in the world. Lennon's early-Seventies albums were covered extensively, but he largely dropped out of the scene in 1975, after his son Sean was born. When he reemerged in 1980 with a new record, he agreed to a cover story. He was shot and killed later just hours after the cover photo was taken.

OF ALL THE PEOPLE to bear the news to the nation, it fell to Howard Cosell, while calling a *Monday Night Football* game on ABC. The news was so improbable that it was beyond belief. Jane and I were stunned. Is it real? How could this happen? What should we do? I needed to talk to people who might help me. I got hold of ROLLING STONE music editor Greil Marcus. I called Annie to have her go to the Dakota, the Manhattan apartment building where John had been gunned down, even though she didn't want to. It was all I could think of. In the early-morning hours, when the phone calls stopped, I walked across Central Park to the Dakota, where several hundred people stood vigil in the winter air. I stood there trying to absorb the awesome and frightening reality that such a man, a towering man, an irreplaceable genius of my times, to whom I owed a deep personal debt, had been murdered, and that I, and perhaps all of us, were in scary, dark waters. My mind was filled with waves of sadness for Yoko and her son. And there I stood for hours.

The next week was gloom and solemn purpose. Nothing else mattered. John Lennon had been murdered. He was gone, this great man at the center of everything I believed. Why does a man who writes of love, an artist who stands for peace, get shot down on his doorstep? I went into the office each day, obviously shaken. The staff was quiet and respectful, probably worried about me. We had to put out an issue. John and Yoko had just released a new album, *Double Fantasy,* their first in years, and they had been at work with Annie and Jonathan Cott on a ROLLING STONE cover story, like old times. We had great new photographs and what had become John's last solo interview. John and Jonathan had spent nine hours with each other. I was determined to do the most beautiful tribute issue of all time. Everyone knew that we had to rise to an occasion that seemed unimaginable. The last line of our introduction read, "It's hard to believe our luck has gotten this bad." I insisted on being hands-on with every bit of it.

I stayed in my dark office listening to *Double Fantasy*, sinking deeper into mourning and sorrow. I felt dulled out, depressed, as I quietly worked on copy, approving layouts, taking phone calls. Jane Pauley asked if I would be a guest on an NBC News special they were doing the night after the murder. At one point, Jane asked me if I thought John and Yoko deserved credit for ending the war in Vietnam. I didn't hesitate: "Yes. Absolutely. There were many factors that ended the war, but John and Yoko were one of them."

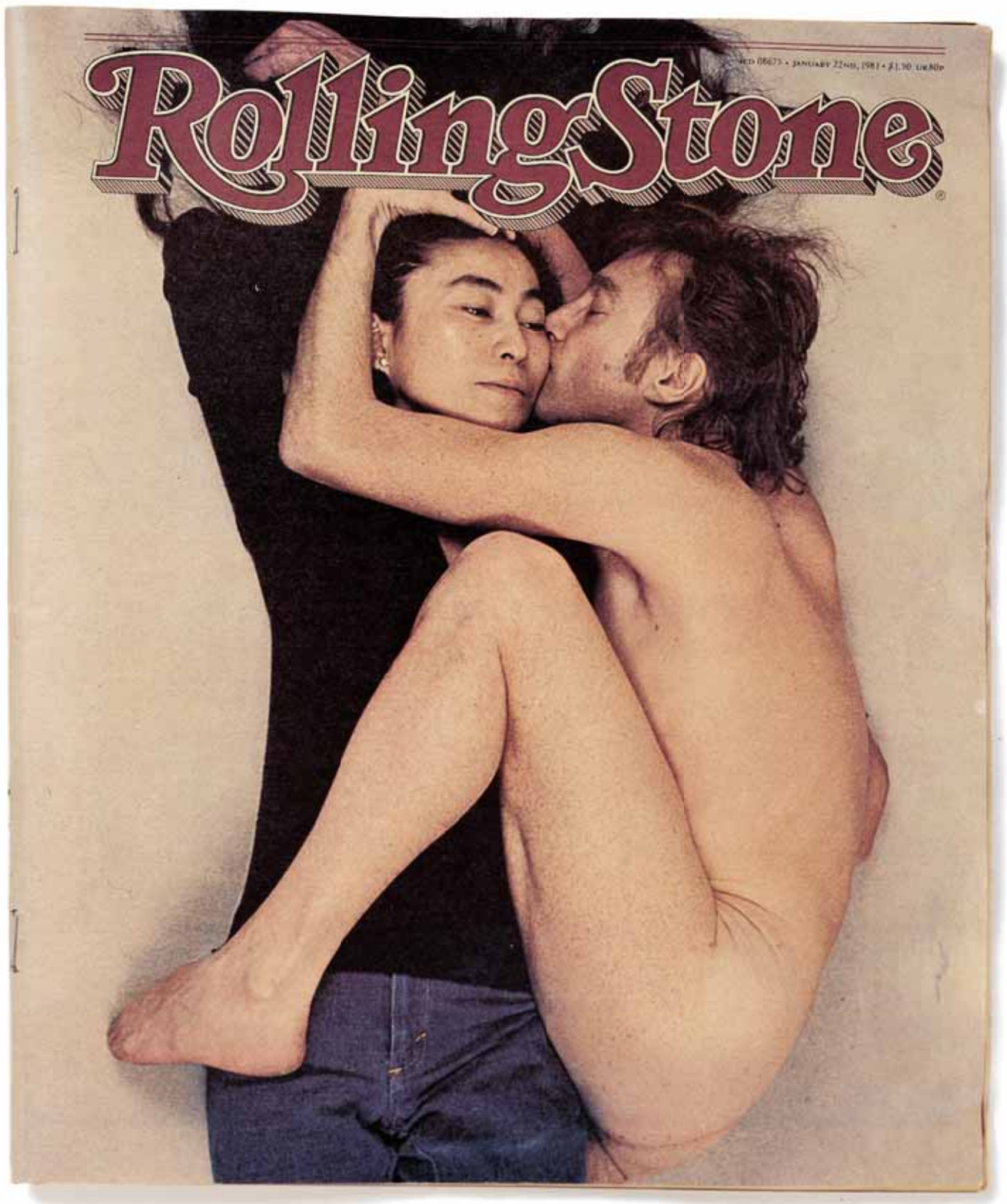
The next day Yoko called. She had been watching. She wanted me to come over to the Dakota. I had not seen her or John in person for 10 years. John had been passing me messages through Jonathan during the past two weeks as we were gearing up to help them launch *Double Fantasy*.

A vigil was still underway outside the building, and I walked through the very place of his death and went up to her seventh-floor apartment, where I was asked to remove my shoes. There were beefy off-duty cops at the door and inside as well. It was hushed. No television was on, no newspapers were in sight. Yoko was under siege. She didn't know what would happen next. She gave me an account of the killer calling out John's name and then the gun coming out, how she and John had seen him there in the afternoon when they'd left, and what it had been like at the hospital. Sean scampered through to say hello and shake hands like a grown-up. She had John's glasses with dried blood on them. She wanted me to look at them and hold them. Yoko asked for 10 minutes of silence around the world on Sunday at 2 p.m., New York time. There were mass gatherings in Liverpool and London and cities across America and around the world. The largest was in Central Park. Jonathan came to my apartment, and we walked over together. More than 100,000 people had assembled. The band shell was empty but for two stacks of speakers, a portrait of John on an easel, garlands of evergreen, and a single wreath. His softer songs played: "In My Life," "Norwegian Wood." The sun broke through for "All You Need Is Love," and the clouds reappeared for "Give Peace a Chance." During the moment of silence, the helicopters flew away out of respect; there was not a noise of any kind among the thousands of people I was with. It was simple and peaceful. You could feel John's spirit moving. After 10 minutes, the meditation ended with "Imagine." As Jonathan and I walked back to the office, it began to snow. I felt older.

For our special issue, Annie had shot a photo of John and Yoko, with John naked, curled up in a fetal position around Yoko. They had told Annie they wanted that picture on the cover. It was unimaginably powerful, an echo of their *Two Virgins* photo, and now something like a foreshadowing of death and rebirth. It said all there was to say, and I decided there would be no headline or words. I didn't like the idea of an advertisement on the back cover either and pulled it, replacing it with the lyrics to "Imagine" in my own handwriting.

Just before we went to press, I wrote a small note to John, promising to watch over Yoko and Sean; it was hidden in the binding. That was my secret, although Yoko somehow got wind of it 20 years later. John and Yoko had kept watch over ROLLING STONE. Now those days were gone.

BY JANN S. WENNER



THE LAST PHOTO SHOOT
Taken just hours before he was murdered, the Annie Leibovitz portrait became the front page of the issue dedicated to Lennon. The both haunting and loving image is one of the most iconic magazine covers of all time.

Fort Bragg's Hidden Crisis

By Seth Harp

A staggering total of 109 soldiers assigned to Fort Bragg died in 2020 and 2021. Dozens have lost their lives there to drug overdoses. Now, their families are demanding answers — and accountability

ILLUSTRATION BY JOAN WONG

RACHEAL BOWMAN, a single mother from Aberdeen, Maryland, was finishing up her shift as a postal worker the afternoon of June 11, 2021, when she got a worrisome call from her son's girlfriend. Her son, Matthew Disney, a 20-year-old soldier stationed at Fort Bragg, North Carolina, wasn't answering his phone. Neither his girlfriend nor his mom nor his little sisters could reach him. "It was very unlike him," Bowman says. "Matthew's sister has been incredibly ill her whole life" with a rare intestinal disorder. "When she calls, he answers." ■ Her son was the child she never had to worry about, Bowman tells ROLLING STONE. As a boy, he was well-behaved and supportive

of his mom, who had been through a nasty divorce and struggled financially. He was "upbeat and passionate" about baseball, football, and video games. And for as long as she could remember, he'd had it in his head to join the military. "He had the very strong belief that if you were able-bodied, you should serve your country," Bowman says. "Whether you like your president or not. He could tell you all about other countries where it was mandatory."

Disney considered all the service branches, and decided on the U.S. Army. He enlisted after high school, trained as a radar operator and, in March 2020, was assigned to an airborne artillery regiment at Fort Bragg. He had done nine parachute jumps, and the last time he spoke to his mom, he was excited to do his 10th. But that Friday in June, he had the day off. "Hours were going by and he was not responding to any of us," Bowman says. "This was extremely out of character."

Bowman and her daughters called up some of Disney's friends, fellow soldiers at Fort Bragg, and they alerted the fire guard on duty, she says, who located surveillance footage of Disney and another radarman, Spc. Joshua Diamond, entering the barracks at 11 the night before. But when they knocked on Diamond's locked door, no one answered. Neither the fire guard nor the military police would open Diamond's door by force, because 24 hours hadn't elapsed, meaning he and Disney couldn't be considered missing persons. "Even though there were family members saying something is wrong," Bowman says, "they would not open the locked door."

Bowman was frantic. She contacted a family friend in Maryland, a colonel in the Army, and he made some calls that evidently spurred the military police into action. They called Bowman and asked her permission to track her son's phone. "And then it was crickets," she says. "Everything went silent. The second I gave my permission to ping his phone, the MPs wouldn't talk to us."

The Army follows a strict procedure for notifying the next of kin of casualties, and always sends a uniformed officer to deliver the bad news in person. But around midnight, Disney's sister received an anonymous call. Bowman was standing on the front porch. "I just heard her scream," she says. "And I went inside, and she was on the kitchen floor with Matt's girlfriend, screaming 'This isn't fucking funny. Who the fuck are you? What kind of sick joke is this?'"

The caller would only tell them that Disney was "no longer alive." Bowman placed phone call after desperate phone call and, at two in the morning, got through to her son's battalion commander. He confirmed that Disney had been found in Diamond's room, lifeless. "I'm so sorry," she remembers him saying. "He was a good kid." But he wouldn't tell her what had happened, only that Disney "didn't do anything to hurt himself."

Iraq War vet and contributing editor SETH HARP *wrote "Delta Force's Dirty Secret" in January.*

On top of the shock and grief of learning that her only son was dead, Bowman was confused. If it wasn't suicide, then what had happened to Matthew? All she could think was that the other soldier, Diamond, must have done something to harm him.

That was not the case. In fact, Diamond was dead, too. His body had been found slumped over Disney's on the floor, almost as if in an embrace. And many Fort Bragg soldiers have died recently under similar circumstances – quietly, in their barracks, in their bunks, in a parked car, or somewhere off-post, from no outwardly apparent cause. According to a set of casualty reports obtained by ROLLING STONE through the Freedom of Information Act, at least 14 – and as many as 30 – Fort Bragg soldiers have died in this way since the start of 2020. Yet there has been no acknowledgment from the Army or reporting in the national press on any aspect of this phenomenon, nor word one from any member of Congress. Only the families of the victims have been informed – discreetly, and in private.

Disney's memorial service was in July. "We were getting ready to go into the chapel," Bowman says, and Maj. Gen. Chris Donahue, the commander of the 82nd Airborne Division, came into the room and personally informed her that the results of a toxicology report were in. The cause of death was acute fentanyl intoxication.

"The Army was like, 'Here, go tie ribbons on trees,'" says Disney's mom. "They need to start talking about the problem. But they don't want to acknowledge it."

Donahue, who has since been promoted to lieutenant general, did not respond to a request for comment sent to Fort Bragg. But ROLLING STONE obtained Disney's Defense Department Form 1300, a "report of casualty," which essentially functions as a military death certificate. It confirms that he died accidentally from an overdose of fentanyl.

That only compounded Bowman's confusion. "My son was not a drug user," she insists. Under no circumstances would he have wittingly ingested fentanyl. Addiction ran in the family, and Disney's little sister had endured dozens of surgeries, and periodically relied on or had to withdraw from opioids, so he was well aware of the risks they entailed. "Fentanyl, ketamine, Narcan, laudanum, Percocet, morphine," Bowman says. "These are drugs that we talked about on a very regular basis."

However, one conversation she never had with her kids was about counterfeit pills. Military investigators informed her that Disney had ingested an imitation Percocet, a prescription painkiller. "I had never in my life heard of a fake Percocet that looked legit from a pharmacy," she says, "until my son took one and it killed him."

A STAGGERING TOTAL OF 109 soldiers assigned to Fort Bragg, active and reserve, lost their lives in 2020 and 2021, casualty reports obtained through the Freedom of Information Act show. Only four of the deaths occurred in overseas combat operations. All the rest took place stateside. Fewer than 20 were from natural causes. All the rest were preventable. This is a seemingly unprecedented wave of fatalities on a modern U.S. military installation.

Forty-one Fort Bragg soldiers took their own lives in 2020 and 2021, making suicide the leading cause of death. A spokesman for the Army, Matthew Leonard, confirmed that no other base has ever recorded a higher two-year suicide toll. There were also a shocking number of incidents of soldier-on-soldier violence. Since mid-2020, 11 Fort Bragg soldiers have been murdered or charged with murder, including one murder-suicide. Five Fort Bragg soldiers were shot to death, and one was beheaded. ROLLING STONE has previously reported on the rash of violent crime at Fort Bragg and investigated several of the unsolved murders. The newly obtained documents shed light on another kind of killer stalking soldiers and go a long way toward explaining the record-setting death toll.

Fourteen of the casualty reports state explicitly that the soldier died from a drug overdose. Eleven of these identify fentanyl as the fatal agent. In five other cases, the soldier died at a young age from acute renal or liver failure, or from a heart attack – medical events that young people typically don't experience, but that can be brought on by heavy drug abuse, complications from mixing drugs, or organ damage from the use of banned steroids. In addition, there were two cases where soldiers died from "undetermined" causes after being found unresponsive, for a total of 21 probable drug-related deaths in the two years ending December 2021. By comparison, there were about 13 illness deaths at Fort Bragg over the same period, 14 car and motorcycle crashes, and three fatal training accidents. Putting aside instances of self-harm, then, accidental overdose is the leading cause of death at Fort Bragg.

ROLLING STONE obtained the casualty reports from the U.S. Army Human Resources Command, not Fort Bragg, where officials have been not at all forthcoming. A spokesman for the base – a colonel – said that the number of deaths in 2020 was 45. According to the reports, it was 56. Another spokesman, a captain, stated in writing that the 2021 death toll was 38. In fact, it was

Casualties of the Home Front

Matthew Disney (left) and Joshua Diamond (below) were found dead in their barracks after taking a fake Percocet that had been laced with fentanyl. According to a set of casualty reports obtained by *Rolling Stone,* at least 14 — and as many as 30 — Fort Bragg soldiers have died in this way since the start of 2020. "All these deaths are happening in the same way, and no one is talking about it," says Racheal Bowman, Disney's mom. "It's all swept under the rug."

53. The same captain also told ROLLING STONE that the number of opioid overdoses last year was four. In reality, it was at least six, and probably 11, if you count all of the deaths that were likely drug related. When confronted with these facts, Fort Bragg officials deflect blame and point to trends in the general population. "We do not see this as an isolated issue that only plagues Fort Bragg," Capt. Matt Visser wrote in an email. He pointed to the proximity of Interstate 95 – the highway from Miami to New York, a notorious drug-trafficking corridor – which "increases the accessibility of substances" to Fort Bragg soldiers.

In most cases, there is no announcement when a soldier OD's. For instance, on Feb. 23, 2020, Spc. Christopher Jenkins, a 22-year-old intelligence analyst, died of "fentanyl and dextromethorphan intoxication," according to his casualty report. Though it occurred on Fort Bragg, there was no press release, and no news reports of the death of this active-duty soldier, who was from West Palm Beach, Florida. No obituary was published, and Jenkins left no trace on the internet.

Other Fort Bragg soldiers who died of an overdose with no public notice in 2020 and 2021 include Spc. Christhiam Gonzalez-Pineda, a helicopter repairman originally from Honduras who died from the acute effects of unspecified "illegal substances," per his casualty report; Pfc. Anthony Savala, an infantryman from California who died from a cocktail of Benadryl, benzodiazepines, and fentanyl; Spc. Zachary Bracken, a Green Beret candidate from Maryland who died from a combination of alcohol and fentanyl; Sgt. 1st Class Michael Tardie, an infantryman from Arizona who died from the same mixture; Sgt. David Mazzullo, a signals-intelligence analyst from New York who died from an overdose of heroin and fentanyl; and Spc. Matthew Meadows, a parachute rigger from Texas who died from fentanyl alone. None of these deaths were made public.

In other cases, for reasons that aren't clear, Fort Bragg did make an announcement when a soldier died of an overdose, but in a vague and euphemistic way that made no mention of drugs. For example, a Special Forces candidate from Ohio named Jamie Boger was found "unresponsive in his barracks," according to a March 16, 2020, press release; his casualty report shows that he died of cocaine and fentanyl intoxication. Likewise, on Nov. 11, 2020, Spc. Terrance Salazar, an infantryman from Texas, was found "unresponsive in his room"; he died from mixing alcohol and cough syrup. Pfc. Mikel Rubino, an infantryman from California, was "found unresponsive in his barracks room" on Aug. 13, 2021; he died from a fentanyl overdose, according to his casualty report. Six weeks later, an artillery spotter from Texas was found "unresponsive" in his off-post housing; his cause of death remains pending determination.

The artillery spotter died in the first week of October 2021, a month during which Fort Bragg soldiers were losing their lives at the incredible rate of one every three days. The local newspaper, *The Fayetteville Observer,* picked up on the trend of soldiers dying from unexplained causes and published an article on Oct. 30 that tied together the cases of "six soldiers found dead in barracks on post." After that, the public-affairs office seems to have quit announcing overdose deaths altogether. The incidents of apparently healthy young men turning up "unresponsive" stopped.

Nonetheless, another 21 Fort Bragg soldiers died over the subsequent five months – one from a confirmed overdose, and nine others from causes pending determination. The most recent soldier to turn up lifeless on Fort Bragg from causes that the Army can't or won't explain was Maj. Eric Ewoldsen, on March 25, 2022. Ewoldsen was not just any soldier. According to multiple sources, he was an officer on Delta Force, a top-secret manhunting unit said to be the most selective organization in the entire Department of Defense. It's a mystery how Ewoldsen, a 38-year-old fitness fanatic, ended up slumped over in a parked vehicle somewhere on Fort Bragg, but sources close to his family say that no foul play was involved. "His death is not a result of malpractice or anything nefarious," Ewoldsen's former Delta Force teammate Cody McBride wrote in an email.

"All these deaths are happening in the same way, and no one is talking about it," says Racheal Bowman, Disney's mom. "It's all very secretive. It's all swept under the rug." She adds, "This is obviously a problem. How is it that nobody knows about it?"

MANY PEOPLE ASSUME that because soldiers are regularly drug-tested they can't use illicit substances. This assumption is mistaken. The Army has long taken a more lackadaisical attitude toward drug use than some might expect. Many years ago, when I enlisted, my recruiter asked me not

PREVIOUS SPREAD: IMAGES WITHIN ILLUSTRATION BY OMAR MARQUES/GETTY IMAGES; PAPERKITES/ISTOCK/GETTY IMAGES. THIS PAGE: COURTESY OF THE FAMILIES

whether I smoked marijuana but rather, "When was the last time?" He then showed me a mini-fridge in his office that was full of detox drinks that he said would allow me to pass a urinalysis. Later, when my unit was about to deploy to Iraq, a sergeant in my platoon tested positive for cocaine. Nothing happened to him.

To an even greater extent than Americans in general, U.S. soldiers are overworked, stressed out, and chronically deprived of sleep. To cope with the demands of their physically and emotionally taxing jobs, they turn to a whole range of potent substances, legal and illegal, whether it's a hyper-caffeinated energy drink to boost a predawn workout, an off-duty joint to ease a chronic injury, steroids to obtain an edge in selection for an elite unit, or a line of cocaine in the bathroom of a bar after a deployment. Hard-drug use is increasingly apparent in the Special Forces. A group of Navy SEAL whistleblowers told CBS News that the military's drug-testing protocols are "a joke." In many cases, there's no institutional incentive for commanders to punish soldiers for simple possession or use. It's an offense best dealt with quietly and administratively. But fentanyl has changed the calculus.

Fentanyl overdose is now the leading cause of death among American adults under the age of 45. The cheaply manufactured, perniciously addictive, superpotent nightmare drug has contaminated the whole range of illicit narcotics in the United States. People who think they're taking cocaine, Xanax, hydrocodone, or some other relatively softer substance may end up ingesting it unknowingly. Indeed, many of these deaths should not be considered overdoses at all, but rather accidental poisonings.

"He definitely didn't know it was fentanyl, that's for certain," says a close friend of Spc. Joshua Diamond, the radarman whose room Disney was found dead in. "Based off of text messages they found on his phone, he purchased a Percocet."

Or so he thought. It's not clear whether Diamond and Disney split one pill or took one each. Their families learned from investigators that Diamond had purchased the pill or pills from a fellow soldier in the 82nd Airborne, who got them off the dark web.

Diamond grew up in Taunton, Massachusetts, a small town south of Boston. According to the friend (who wanted to remain anonymous because he works in law enforcement), Diamond did "backbreaking jobs" in his twenties, "roadwork," and joined the Army at the age of 34 in search of "structure in his life." He wanted "something he could be proud of," the friend says, "a stable career."

The region of Massachusetts where he and Diamond grew up together is "riddled with overdose deaths," he says, but the friend is vague about Diamond's past use of drugs. "I don't want to sit here and say he was a saint and a choirboy," he says. "Anything that he was involved in, it wasn't a lifestyle."

Demanding Justice Bowman is furious that the soldier suspected of dealing the fake Percocet to her son received only a year in prison.

The last time he saw Diamond, in May 2021, he had recently redeployed from Iraq. "His life was in good shape," the friend says. "He was planning to ask his girlfriend to marry him. He was doing great. That's why it's so devastating. I thought he was going to learn a craft and be proud of himself. Instead, he got put in a pine box."

THE DIRECTOR OF the National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA), Dr. Nora Volkow, tells ROLLING STONE that the number of opioid overdose deaths in the United States has been rising relentlessly for the past two decades. At first the problem was prescription pills, then heroin. She compares the emergence of fentanyl around 2015 or 2016 to the Omicron variant of Covid-19. "It just took hold everywhere," she says.

Fentanyl is a classic example of the reliable tendency, well-known to economists, of drug and alcohol prohibitions to produce new substances that are ever-more potent, compact, cheap to manufacture, and toxic to users. Unlike heroin, fentanyl can be synthesized in a lab with no need to grow poppy plants. It is so highly concentrated that it can be distributed efficiently through the mail. "It is more powerful, more addictive, more rewarding," Volkow says, "and much more likely to result in an overdose."

On average, she says, members of the military are less likely to die of an opioid overdose than the general population, in large part because of entry-level screening that excludes people with preexisting substance-use disorders. However, recent studies show a "fast and dramatic" rise in the absolute number of overdose deaths among active-duty military men, she says. "They have been going up, just like in the whole United States." She adds that the military medical system has been "very proactive" in its response, "particularly in the distribution of Naloxone."

In addition to casualty reports from Fort Bragg, ROLLING STONE obtained the casualty reports for every U.S. soldier, Army-wide, who died in 2021. The documents show that of 505 total deaths, 33 were confirmed overdoses. That alone would make overdose a leading cause of death among American soldiers, behind suicide, illness, and accidents, but well in excess of homicides and combat fatalities. However, just like at Fort Bragg, there are a substantial number of deaths from what the Army has labeled "undetermined" causes. If deemed overdoses, these would significantly increase the total. These 27 cases "pending determination" include a soldier who was found "unresponsive" in his barracks in Vicenza, Italy; three soldiers stationed in Alaska who were found dead over the winter, two at home and one in a vehicle; another Alaska-based soldier who died down in California from what the Los Angeles County Medical Examiner determined was a fentanyl overdose; and the deaths of two Special Forces soldiers, one in El Salvador and one in Long Island, New York, from causes the Army hasn't determined.

Whatever the true total of soldier overdoses, it's clear that a lopsided percentage of them take place at Fort Bragg, which is distinct from most other bases in that it's overwhelmingly populated by male soldiers in combat-arms units. It is a base full of trigger pullers, where many have done multiple deployments to Afghanistan, Syria, Iraq, and elsewhere. Most recently, it was the 82nd that evacuated the Kabul airport when the U.S. withdrew. Nolkow says that while soldiers are less likely than civilians, on average, to develop a drug habit, "the psychological distress

PHOTOGRAPH BY JARED SOARES

of being deployed, seeing people die, and being in a war zone" makes combat veterans "more vulnerable to drug taking and very heavy drinking as they try to auto-medicate the intense anxiety associated with PTSD."

According to medical experts, alcohol and drug misuse are second only to depression and other mood disorders as predictors of suicidal behavior. Trauma feeds into both suicides and overdoses, which oftentimes can be hard for medical examiners to tell apart.

The surge in both at Fort Bragg coincided with the demoralizing end of the war in Afghanistan, in which the Special Forces and the 82nd Airborne played so prominent a role. That dispiriting defeat, after 20 years of hard fighting against a determined enemy, no doubt contributes to the malaise driving soldiers to drug themselves with opioids and other toxic narcotics. There are historical parallels here to the widespread use of heroin by American soldiers at the tail end of the Vietnam War. Military leaders will deny it and say that morale is high, but there is a palpable sense of purposelessness and disillusionment hanging over bases like Fort Bragg. "It's a depressing place," says a young soldier in the 82nd who was having breakfast at the nearby McDonald's recently. "Everyone hates it."

Despite the lack of reporting on this issue, Fort Bragg knows it has a problem. In a statement to ROLLING STONE, a spokesman said that the base had taken a number of new measures recently to decrease the distribution of drugs on-post. They had stepped up police presence at the gates, increased background checks on visitors, deployed more drug-sniffing dogs, and raised the frequency of random urinalysis testing, Capt. Visser wrote. Nevertheless, drug-related crime increased a full 100 percent in fiscal year 2021, an officer in the provost marshal's office admitted to the local ABC affiliate. According to data obtained by ROLLING STONE, no fewer than 232 Fort Bragg soldiers were charged last year under the Uniform Code of Military Justice with possession, use, or distribution of a controlled substance, including an incident in which an MP was accused of moonlighting as a drug dealer, and selling Oxycodone from his cop car. And 2021 saw a continuation of a trend that ROLLING STONE has previously reported on: Green Berets and other elite soldiers getting into the drug game.

Last year, I wrote about the case of Billy Lavigne, a dope-dealing Delta Force operator found murdered in the woods outside of Fort Bragg in December 2020. Two sources who knew Lavigne now say that they believe he was working with the North Carolina operation of a Mexican drug-trafficking cartel.

"That man worked for the cartel," says a tattoo artist who saw Lavigne in November 2020, shortly before he was found shot to death in the back of his own truck. "He was transporting crystal meth. He was driving with people that were coming back from their pickup location, and collecting money if somebody was being a problem and not wanting to pay." She adds, "I rode with him a couple of times to Atlanta, where they were doing the cooking." In her view, "it had to have been the cartel that killed him."

Lavigne was out of his mind on drugs and committed a string of irrational crimes from 2018 to 2020, including the murder of his best friend, a fellow Green Beret. Though the sheriff and DA's office let him off the hook every time in an apparent favor to Delta Force, the cartel didn't appreciate him drawing so much attention, the tattoo artist says. "It's something called greenlighted," she explains. "It means you're going to be killed."

Lavigne's murder remains unsolved. "My speculation is he got involved with the cartels and was probably selling or moving stuff," says James Reese, a retired Delta Force lieutenant colonel who knew Lavigne personally and worked with him in Iraq. "He probably started owing them money and couldn't pay. Then the sandman came for Billy."

"The Army really had no interest in how he died," says one grieving mother. "I have many unanswered questions, but nobody seems to give a shit."

Also unsolved is the cryptic case of Enrique Roman Martinez, the young Fort Bragg soldier from Chino, California, who was beheaded during a May 2020 camping trip with six of his comrades from the 82nd. ROLLING STONE recently obtained CID's entire 1,526-page investigative file on the suspected murder case, which makes clear that LSD played a key role in what went down. The partially redacted documents, including the campers' handwritten statements, paint a picture of an outing to the beach that devolved into a bad psychedelic trip, then a horror movie, but never quite make clear who the culprits were that chopped off Martinez's head.

More recently, in May 2021, a master sergeant in the 82nd named Martin Acevedo III was arrested in a joint raid by the Department of Homeland Security and the Cumberland County Sheriff's Office. The feds seized more than two kilos of coke, several firearms, and $99,808 in cash from his house on Green Heron Drive, and hit him with heavy-duty trafficking charges. Acevedo pleaded guilty and is scheduled to be sentenced in August 2022.

Four months after Acevedo's arrest, a Special Forces staff sergeant named David Rankine was charged with drug trafficking for importing "diverse amounts of anabolic steroids" into the United States. Rankine was also charged with cocaine use, child endangerment for allegedly snorting and injecting drugs in front of a minor, as well as sexual assault for forcing a woman to perform oral sex on him at gunpoint. He pleaded guilty to all but the child-endangerment charge and was sentenced to five years in prison.

To better understand the psychology of soldiers – particularly elite soldiers – who turn to drug trafficking, I wrote to Master Sgt. Daniel Gould, a Green Beret who won a Silver Star for valor in Afghanistan, only to be convicted in 2019 of conspiring to import a large quantity of cocaine into the U.S. from Colombia. "I had a great paycheck, and I didn't need to do what I did," Gould wrote back in a letter from federal prison, where he is serving a nine-year sentence. Money was part of what motivated him, he explained, but he mostly did it for the challenge, out of boredom, and because he'd lost touch with right and wrong due to the moral gray zone Special Forces soldiers so often inhabit: "The opportunity was there, and I took the risk."

Gould's scheme might have succeeded had it not been for a captain named Stephen Murga. Murga, an infantry officer assigned to the DEA station in Bogotá, got suspicious when Gould asked him to load a pair of punching bags onto a C-130 bound for Florida, and to not stop by the U.S. embassy on the way to the airfield. "I knew something was going on," Murga tells ROLLING STONE. "Knowing Dan, I wouldn't put anything past him." Murga tipped off the DEA, and Gould was forced to turn himself in.

Gould was an "adrenaline junkie" and a "war hero brought down by his ego," in Murga's estimation. "His Silver Star citation is the key to his persona. He was a Special Forces team leader. They were ambushed by the Taliban. He assaulted the ambush line, and killed, like, 14 of them."

The adulation and praise that Gould received as a result made him feel as though he was untouchable, Murga says. He adds that it's a "character arc" common to a lot of elite soldiers, in his experience. "I worked with a lot of SF operators over the past five years," he says. "I don't think he was motivated by money, but by danger and excitement. He thought he could get away with it."

ALTHOUGH THE PRESIDENT is commander in chief, Congress has broad authority to fund, organize, manage, and regulate the military, and when necessary, to reform it. This was apparent in 2020, when the House Armed Services Committee created an independent review board to assess the leadership failures that led to 28 soldier deaths at Fort Hood, Texas, in the span of a [*Cont. on 75*]

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Reviews

Music

A POP REBEL'S NEW-STYLE SWAGGER

Rina Sawayama breaks stuff and builds back better on her excellent second album

By ROB SHEFFIELD

Rina Sawayama
Hold the Girl
DIRTY HIT
★★★★☆

RINA SAWAYAMA IS everything you could pray for in a pop provocateur, circa 2022: rude, audacious, unpredictable, hilarious, blunt, with a mean streak and an omnivorous ear. The Japanese British art rebel made waves with her full-length debut, *Sawayama*, a pop manifesto with her own queer glam-rock sensibility. In gems like "STFU!," she managed to combine Y2K-era teen disco and nu metal into a new style of headbanging swagger. Anyone could hear it: Rina Sawayama was born to break stuff.

Her long-awaited *Hold the Girl* is a personal journal – a Saturn-return statement about moving out of her twenties and facing up to her past. It's smoother ➔

ILLUSTRATION BY
Yuko Shimizu

RINA SAWAYAMA

on the surface than *Sawayama,* channeling her twisted visions into straight-ahead pop tunes with arena-ready confidence. The whole album is high on queer bravado. As she belts in the Gaga-style title tune, "Sometimes I get down with guilt/For the promises I've broken to my younger self."

But that younger Rina should be proud, because *Hold the Girl* remains prickly no matter how slick the hooks might get. She delves deep into her troubled childhood, raised by a Japanese single mother in London who didn't speak English and struggled just to feed them both. Her main songwriting inspiration here is Taylor Swift – like a lot of artists, she got her mind blown by *Folklore* and took it as an invitation to get more into storytelling. As she told ROLLING STONE U.K. last year, "I remember when Taylor Swift released *Folklore,* I was like, 'This bitch is writing about fake stories, and she just wrote a whole album. If she can do it, I need to do it.'"

"This Hell" sets the tone, lashing out at homophobes with a brash mix of disco and yeehaw country – the intro has synthesized horse neighs and a quote from Shania Twain, declaring "Let's go, girls!" "Catch Me in the Air" comes to terms with her mother, to clubby beats from Madonna producer Stuart Price. Sawayama is at her weirdest and best when she ramps up the tempo for kinkier sonic twists and turns. "Your Age" is a mix of bhangra and electro-warp sound effects, as she tries to process some early trauma, spitting "You fucked with my life."

"Frankenstein" is her peak, a high-energy meditation on the strange love between the mad scientist and the monster. She begs for a Dr. Frankenstein to take control of her and rebuild her, until she breaks down in the chant, "I don't want to be a monster anymore." "Frankenstein" sums up Sawayama at her musical and emotional extremes – torn between the desire to be beautiful and the need to be free.

She started writing these songs via Zoom with her trustiest collaborators, producer Clarence Clarity and co-writer Lauren Aquilina. But it seems the isolation of lockdown made her bolder about looking inside herself. The most exciting thing about *Hold the Girl* is that you can't even guess where Sawayama might go next.

NOAH GROWS UP IN PRIVATE

The youngest member of the Cyrus clan finds her voice By MAURA JOHNSTON

Noah Cyrus
The Hardest Part
Columbia
★★★★☆

NOAH CYRUS opens her debut full-length with a stark lyric: "When I turned 20, I was overcome/ With the thought that I might not turn 21," she murmurs over fingerpicked guitars and whispers of feedback. It's a grab-you-by-the-throat introduction that is a fitting opening for *The Hardest Part,* a compact yet emotionally resonant collection of Laurel Canyon-recalling pop from the youngest member of the Cyrus clan. Channeling Cyrus' recent travails, which include the death of her grandmother, her parents' romantic problems, and her own addiction to and recovery from Xanax, *The Hardest Part* is unflinching yet tender.

That opener, "Noah (Stand Still)," blooms from a white-knuckle description of the anomie caused by the early days of sobriety into a chugging, resolute plea to keep going, with banjo and backing vocals underscoring Cyrus' message. It's not a fairy-tale ending – the wailed bridge closes out with the slightly doomy mantra "Life goes on and on until…" – but it's determined enough to be a happy one, and it echoes the themes of getting through hard times that abound on the album.

Musically, *The Hardest Part* walks the line between modern acoustic pop and classic country, calling back to Cyrus' Nashville-steeped upbringing while also being in step with of-the-moment young artists. "I Just Want a Lover" grapples with lockdown angst and the gossip press's intrusive eye as Cyrus longs for "a lover who's in love with me, not another liar making love to me" over a darkly hued instrumental that hearkens back to the moody soft rock of the mid-Eighties. "Every Beginning Ends" is another standout, a pedal-steel-accented duet with Death Cab for Cutie frontman Ben Gibbard that's a solid tear-in-the-beer country ballad. Cyrus' weathered alto and Gibbard's Willie Nelson-like croon intertwine as they lament the slow dissolution of a romance with the forlorn vocal melody only illuminating the sadness at the song's core. And "Loretta's Song," which closes the album, is named after Cyrus' maternal grandmother, Loretta Finley, who died in August 2020, but it's a gorgeously wrought country-gospel hymn, with Cyrus' voice in full flower as she leads a choir in celebrating life and the afterlife.

Cyrus has always been in the spotlight, all the way back to appearing on her father Billy Ray's TV drama, *Doc,* when she was two years old. But *The Hardest Part* is the result of her stepping away and figuring out who she is – and the songs she wrote during that time sound appealing even as they're digging into knotty, complex emotions.

FROM TOP: WALKER BUNTING; DENNIS LEUPOLD

BREAKING

India Shawn's Conversationally Chill R&B

LOS ANGELES singer-songwriter India Shawn has been on the margins of R&B success for about a decade, writing for artists like Chris Brown and Monica while also independently releasing her own music that's rooted in refined intimacy and her unassumingly gorgeous vocals. Now, she's making her major-label debut, *Before We Go (Deeper).* Collaborators like singer 6lack, Anderson. Paak, and psych-pop crew Unknown Mortal Orchestra help create a chill vibe, from the airy vulnerability of "Don't Play With My Heart" to the steely slow burner "Exchange," making for an LP that flows sweetly from breakups to make-ups and back again. **JON DOLAN**

★★★★★ Classic | ★★★★ Excellent | ★★★ Good | ★★ Fair | ★ Poor RATINGS ARE SUPERVISED BY THE EDITORS OF ROLLING STONE.

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Clark protects the realms as an elven warrior.

ONE SERIES TO RULE THEM ALL

Amazon poured a reported $1 billion into 'The Lord of the Rings: The Rings of Power' – and it shows

ALAN SEPINWALL

The Lord of the Rings: The Rings of Power

NETWORK	Amazon Prime Video
AIR DATE	New episodes premiere Fridays
STARRING	Morfydd Clark Robert Aramayo Markella Kavenagh Ismael Cruz Córdova

"I WANT MY *Game of Thrones*."

This was reportedly the demand that Amazon chairman Jeff Bezos made of his streaming development team five years ago: to stop making little boutique hits like *Transparent* and get into the blockbuster game. His underlings took his instructions as literally as possible, spending a quarter of a billion dollars for the rights to J.R.R. Tolkien's high-fantasy epic *The Lord of the Rings* – a.k.a. one of *Thrones*' biggest influences.

This was before the inert final *Thrones* season melted down viewer enthusiasm for that franchise right along with the Iron Throne itself. Even if Arya Stark's adventures had ended on a higher note, though, it was fair to ask whether the audience was excited for fantasy shows in general, or merely for that particular fantasy show. But HBO just premiered the prequel series *House of the Dragon*, and now Amazon Prime Video has *The Lord of the Rings: The Rings of Power*, reportedly the most expensive TV show ever made.

The good news is that the first two episodes of *Rings of Power* are more than worth the fuss, packed with eye-popping visuals, vividly drawn heroes, and a palpable sense of awe.

The show takes place thousands of years before the events of Peter Jackson's films. Middle Earth is a few centuries past a brutal war between the noble Elves and the evil Morgoth. Galadriel, played by Cate Blanchett as a serene elf elder in the movies, is a (relatively) young woman and fierce warrior, now played by Morfydd Clark. She is obsessed with the belief that Morgoth's sorcerer companion Sauron – you may remember him as a giant glowing eye in *Fellowship of the Ring*, et al. – is still alive and gathering strength for a new assault against the forces of good, even as her friend Elrond (Robert Aramayo) warns her that the elven aristocracy wants to embrace a peaceful future. Meanwhile, a young Hobbit named Nori (Markella Kavenagh) longs for adventure despite her people's desire for safe anonymity, and has a quest literally fall from the sky in front of her, in the form of a man who seems very confused about where and who he is. And small-town healer Bronwyn (Nazanin Boniadi) and elf soldier Arondir (Ismael Cruz Córdova) discover new evidence to support Galadriel's belief that dark times are ahead for humans, Hobbits, Elves, Dwarves, and all the other races of Middle Earth.

Return to Middle Earth.

All of that Amazon money is very much present on the screen. Director J.A. Bayona (*Jurassic World: Fallen Kingdom*) and his frequent cinematographer Oscar Faura craft one stunning image after another, from Galadriel swimming away from a rampaging sea monster to elf warriors scaling a sheer ice wall. The latter scene, and the way *Rings of Power* uses an animated map to transition from location to location, can't help evoking *Game of Thrones* (even if Tolkien's books came first). But everything here looks richer and cooler than *GoT* on all but its best days.

The scale of *Rings of Power* – developed by newcomers J.D. Payne and Patrick McKay – would feel empty without compelling characters at the middle of those lush images. Fortunately, the show has a promising collection of those, first and foremost its more aggro Galadriel. No matter what kind of grand landscapes or horrible creatures she is placed in front of, Clark's fierce, composed performance ensures she is always what you are looking at first. The show is also careful to not require foreknowledge of the books or movies; when Elrond visits his friend Prince Durin (Owain Arthur) in the thriving dwarf kingdom of Khazad-dûm, it's fun but not essential to recognize it as the future site where the Fellowship fights the Balrog.

"There's wonders in this world beyond our wandering," Nori insists. *Rings of Power* has plenty of wonders to offer. Now we'll have to see if viewers are as excited for them as she is. RS

FROM TOP: BEN ROTHSTEIN/PRIME VIDEO; PRIME VIDEO

Movies

Elba and Swinton fulfill some wishes.

MESSAGE (AND MESSES) IN A BOTTLE

George Miller updates an age-old tale about genies and wishes into a meta-text for the 21st century – and a spectacular flop

Three Thousand Years of Longing

STARRING Tilda Swinton, Idris Elba, Burcu Gölgedar, Aamito Lagum

DIRECTED BY George Miller

K. AUSTIN COLLINS

ON A TRIP to Istanbul for a conference, Alithea Binnie (Tilda Swinton), a scholar of narrative and myth, buys a bottle at an old shop. One moment, she's rinsing off the bottle in her hotel sink. The next, a giant Idris Elba – his name is the Djinn – is speaking another language and has set up shop in her bedroom. Her souvenir is apparently home to a genie.

It's shocking, but this is not a tale about shock. Based on a 1994 A.S. Byatt short story, George Miller's *Three Thousand Years of Longing* is instead a story about stories themselves: about the power of narrative, the feats of imagination that sustain us. Strange, then, that the movie fails in its abundant attempts to spellbind us with imagination, thwarted by filmmaking that has none. Very little of it hits. But gosh, does it try.

All the trappings of a genie story are here: the three wishes, the Djinn's desperation for his own freedom, the godlike magic acts that make his eternal captivity in a palm-size bottle so painfully ironic. Alithea's got questions; the Djinn has anecdotes. He wants freedom; it's up to her to help him get it. We're taken back to the time of the Queen of Sheba – an ex-lover of his, apparently – and given a tour of the dark passages and dreary violence overseen by the rule of Suleiman the Magnificent. We meet other conjurers, see sweeping stories of love and deceit, listen in on stories within stories. More than once, the Djinn falls in love, or falls prey to the love of those who discover him.

Miller may be best known for his *Mad Max* movies, but his body of work has traversed genres, and in some ways, *Three Thousand Years of Longing* feels like a tying together of certain strands in his career. *Lorenzo's Oil* (1992) was awestruck by the miracle of science; *The Witches of Eastwick* (1987) by the powers of sex, witchcraft, and movie stars, offering up the likes of Cher, Michelle Pfeiffer, Susan Sarandon, and Jack Nicholson.

This is a movie-star affair, too, and Swinton couldn't make more sense as a narratologist heroine. As for Elba, he makes a case for himself as the kind of a genie you'd want to randomly manifest in your hotel bedroom. All the ingredients are here. But from the outset, Miller seems to want to subvert our usual expectations. The Djinn arrives and there's no fanfare, no crash-banging thuds and whirring smoke of the kind Disney has trained us to expect of a genie story. He just sort of . . . appears. Hunched over, with his back to us, awkwardly squeezed into a human-size room, like Alice before she shrinks, but with none of the consternation you'd expect.

Swinton's bottle episode

It's an admirable choice until you realize these subtleties are a rubric for Miller's approach to the entire movie. Everything underwhelms, and not always on purpose. The stories the Djinn tells, played out in muted flashbacks, are too swift for anything to catch on: The grand proportions are there, but the scintillating details are glanced over and inconsequential. Only a few things stand out: the shimmering beauty of Sheba's skin and swift cruelties of her betrayal; the frustrations of a woman named Zefir, a 19th-century heroine whose genius is suppressed by the strictures of marriage, until a chance encounter helps her find her power.

You know that a movie like this isn't working when you begin to dread yet another drawling blip on the timeline of a multi-thousands-years'-long life. And that's before the off-balance chemistry between this woman and her genie gets thrown off track by the unexpected content of Alithea's wish. There's a political point buried deep at the heart of the movie, one born of exactly the idea that our cultures and stories have more in common than we'd like to let on. But Miller's good intentions undercut the good ideas that his movie only barely explores. It takes forever for the film's too-long road to lead anywhere. The disappointment of it is in how little it has to say once it finally arrives at its destination. RS

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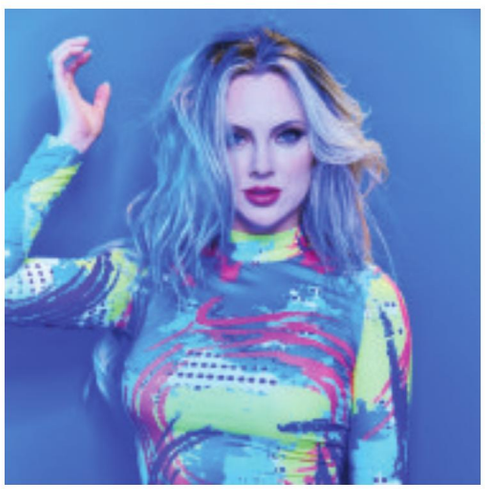

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[*Cont. from 39*] contender for the role of Jack, a charming but secretive husband to Florence Pugh's increasingly troubled Alice. And Styles had plenty of reasons to be interested in *Don't Worry Darling*. Wilde's second feature film as a director reportedly started a bidding war among 18 studios, following the success of her directorial debut, *Booksmart*.

Pre-pandemic talks between Styles and the *Darling* team didn't make it far; he was, after all, due on a global tour for most of 2020. Instead, Shia LaBeouf won the role, but by the end of that summer, Wilde had reportedly booted the actor for poor on-set behavior.

"I'd wanted to act again," Styles says. He spent a lot of the pandemic watching movies with his quarantine set of friends and collaborators: He rescreened favorites like the 2012 Belgian drama *The Broken Circle Breakdown*. Some nights, he and his friends would put a bunch of titles in a hat and choose. ("There was a couple different tastes in the house, so it was between, like, *Parasite* and *Coyote Ugly*.")

Styles was announced as LaBeouf's replacement a month before filming began. He proved perfect for the role of Jack, who's brought Alice to the remote, fictional American town of Victory to work on a secret project the men at the company won't tell their wives about. Jack's become a star employee and is desperate for his boss's approval. "We were looking for someone with innate warmth and palpable charm," Wilde says. "The entire story depended on the audience believing in Jack."

Styles shot *Don't Worry Darling* between September 2020 and February 2021 in L.A. and Palm Springs. Those months were the longest Styles had lived in one place in 11 years. He thought about going completely off the grid while making it: maybe get a flip phone, stop making music. "The reality is you get there on the first day and wait around for 75 percent of it," he says. "And it's like, 'Actually I'm going to text my mate.' "

At the start, he was understandably anxious about taking on such a large role alongside stars like Pugh, Chris Pine, Gemma Chan, and Nick Kroll. "In music, there's such an immediate response to what you do. You finish a song and people clap," he says. "When you're filming and they say 'cut,' there's maybe part of you that expects everyone to start clapping, [but] they don't. Everyone, obviously, goes back to doing their jobs, and you're like, 'Oh, shit, was it that bad?' " (Being an actor reminded him of session musicians: "You get called in to do your bit, and then someone else puts it all together and makes it.")

The risk may pay off: He and Pugh are already getting awards-season buzz. Wilde says one moment "left us all in tears" – Jack's promotion scene during a big company gala. "It's a strange scene, full of fascist references, and a disturbing amount of male rage," Wilde says. "The scene called for him to stand onstage with Frank (Chris Pine) and chant their creepy slogan, 'Who's world is it? Ours!' over and over again. Dark as hell. But Harry took it to another level. He was so fully in the moment, he began screaming the lines to the crowd, in this primal roar, that was way more intense than anything we expected from the scene."

According to Wilde, Pine backed away, understanding this was Harry's moment. "The camera operator followed him as he paced around the stage like a kind of wild animal," Wilde remembers. "We were all gobsmacked at the monitor. I think even Harry was surprised by it. Those are the best moments for an actor – when you're completely outside your body."

Within weeks, Styles went from the set of *Darling* to shooting the more intimate *My Policeman*. He had read the script the year prior, moved by the story enough to have contacted director Michael Grandage and request a meeting. Styles showed up with every line memorized.

Styles plays Tom, a policeman who develops feelings for a museum curator named Patrick (David Dawson). Set in the Fifties, when it was still illegal to be in a same-sex relationship in the U.K., the pair move in secret while Tom pursues a marriage with a schoolteacher named Marion (Emma Corrin). The film shifts between the past and the present, when the three reunite under dire circumstances. "It's obviously pretty unfathomable now to think, 'Oh, you couldn't be gay. That was illegal,' " Styles says. "I think everyone, including myself, has your own journey with figuring out sexuality and getting more comfortable with it." To him, *My Policeman* is a very human story. "It's not like 'This is a gay story about these guys being gay.' It's about love and about wasted time to me."

According to Styles, Grandage wanted to highlight what sex is really like between two men in the scenes between Tom and Patrick. "So much of gay sex in film is two guys going at it, and it kind of removes the tenderness from it," Styles continues. "There will be, I would imagine, some people who watch it who were very much alive during this time when it was illegal to be gay, and [Michael] wanted to show that it's tender and loving and sensitive."

Darling and *Policeman* make their big premieres at prestigious film festivals in Venice and Toronto late this summer, but Styles isn't sure his pivot to the silver screen will be permanent. "I don't imagine I'd do a movie for a while," he says. There are rumors about how many Marvel movies he's signed on for and other franchises he might be secretly in talks to do. (In response to a rumor he'll be starring in a future *Star Wars* series, he says, "That's the first I've heard of that. I'd imagine . . . false.")

He doesn't rule out taking on new roles. "I think there'll be a time again when I'll crave it," he says. "But when you're making music, something's happening. It feels really creative, and it feeds stuff. A large part of acting is the doing-nothing, waiting thing. Which if that's the worst part, then it's a pretty good job. But I don't find that section of it to be that fulfilling. I like doing it in the moment, but I don't think I'll do it a lot."

LIKE A TRUE tousled-haired prince, Styles invites me to attend a concert with him by the philharmonic in Hamburg, eight hours before his own show.

On past tours, he says, "I was getting to a lot of cities and feeling like 'I've been here six times and I've never seen any of it.' " This tour, he's been taking in a lot of architecture. "It's something I can do on my own, just sit somewhere and look at stuff," he says.

Studying the finer points of buildings fits the regimented, disciplined, and distinctly grown-up tour life he's created. Styles has found himself enamored with routine on the road: 10 hours of sleep a night, IV injections pumping him with nutrients and vitamins, a strict acid-reflux-conscious diet that cuts out coffee, alcohol, and certain foods that affect the throat 50,000 fans are depending on. Last night, he slept with two humidifiers that apparently made it look like he was stepping out of a steam room when he opened his hotel-room door.

The Elbphilharmonie Hamburg – "Elphi" for short – is a striking structure, looking something like a gorgeous sail. Styles is wearing the same outfit as when I met him in the hotel the day before, only with shorts swapped out for pinstripe pants and a surgical mask covering his face. He and I are both late and can't be let into the show until intermission, so instead we comb through the backstage hallways and elevators to see rooms built for incredible acoustics and sweeping views of Hamburg. He marvels at all of it. In a temperature-controlled room full of pianos, he asks our tour guide which is the best ("Is there a shining star?") before sitting down at one and playing for a couple of dreamy, Beatlesque minutes. (He'd mentioned earlier that he spent last summer playing piano every day with his morning coffee.) He has questions about paneling. And like a true tourist, he takes pictures of everything.

The first time I ever met Styles was a lot like this. On his first headlining tour, in San Francisco in 2017, I went backstage to interview Kid Harpoon. Styles stumbled into the room where I was waiting, strolling around less like a headliner with fans lined up around the block and more like the lighting guy. Here was someone who is inexplicably difficult to casually enjoy (you watch one video of One Direction's funniest interview moments on YouTube and suddenly you're contemplating how many of their cardboard cutouts you can fit in your dorm) acting so *casually*. He greeted me then like an old friend, not someone who was still refusing to let go of a One Direction keychain at the time. He asked me how I had been, what I was up to in San Francisco, and if I was excited for the show. Of course I remember every second of it.

Styles has a gift for making those in his presence feel seen. Just ask fans who bump into him on walks through Central Park or Hampstead Heath, then detail those moments as if they had met the pope (granted, the pope could never pull off a hair claw).

Before the second half of the concert at the Elphi, the crowd mingles and grabs drinks. As we walk through, Styles goes unnoticed. (The mask helps.) It's funny to watch one of the world's biggest pop stars move through space with such ease, as if he's blissfully unaware of how well-known he is.

"If you make your life about the fact that you can't go anywhere and everything has to be a big deal, then that's what your life becomes," he says. "Now, in London, I walk everywhere. It's hard to stumble across things and restaurants and places and stuff if you're just driving everywhere, and it's just not that fun."

Styles outlines his upcoming months for me: In August, after he wraps his European tour in Lisbon, he'll go on vacation with some friends, maybe catch up on the *Love Island* season he was "gutted" to miss, or see if *The Bear* is as good as everyone tells him it is. The next leg of his tour includes stops in L.A., New York, Austin, and Chicago as extended residencies, a decision that meets his personal need for a less strenuous touring schedule and a professional need to be able to attend film festivals and rent studios to write and record music for his fourth album. "I'm always writing," he says. He and his collaborators are already throwing around ideas. "I think all of us are so excited to get back to it, which feels insane because we've just put an album out."

More than ever, he is thinking about the future. He wants to take meaningful time off at some point

– from touring at least, he's always writing – and ensure he's a more present figure for his family and friends. In turn, he's learned to define what real love looks like to him. "The fantasy, or the vision, or the version of you that people can build you up to be feels like a person that isn't flawed," he explains. "What I value the most from my friends is I feel like I'm constantly reminded that it's OK to be flawed. I think I'm pretty messy and make mistakes sometimes. I think that's the most loving thing: You can see someone's imperfections, and it's not [that you] love them in spite of that, but it's [that you] love them with that."

He's thinking about what it would be like if he had children one day: "Well, if I have kids at some point, I will encourage them to be themselves and be vulnerable and share."

He's thinking about what he wants to say, too. Styles admits he was uninterested in politics as a teenager, oblivious to things that didn't personally affect him. But as he grew more famous, he worried about that, too. "I took a massive look at myself," he says, "and was like, 'Oh, I don't do enough . . . or anything." When conversations around anti-Blackness and inaction reached a fever pitch in 2020, Styles marched in the streets and read books like *How to Be an Anti-Racist,* by Ibram X. Kendi, and *The Will to Change,* by bell hooks. He started thinking about racial and gender equity, especially as someone who employs many people on the road. "Pretending as a white person you don't get a head start just isn't true," he says.

We were hanging out right after *Roe v. Wade* had been overturned in America. "I can't begin to imagine how terrifying it is to be a woman in America at the moment," he says. He'll grab a fan's sign that reads "My Body, My Choice" at the Hamburg show, displaying it proudly onstage. There's an energy in the crowds that fills him with careful optimism. "I feel lucky to see a group of people, even just on this tour, who come together in a way," he says. "I think that group of people is so much less afraid of opening the wound, talking about it, and doing the work, than the generation before us."

As we wait for the philharmonic's packed show to restart, I notice a few young girls with their families in the audience and ask Styles what he thinks the crossover between this crowd and his show tonight will be. He looks around at the mostly older faces and goes, "Less than one percent . . . I know I'll be at both."

Styles watches the orchestra studiously. When the conductor leaves and then returns to a standing ovation, Styles whispers, "He's about to play his big hit." Even when he's not peacocking in front of 50,000, he's still trying to entertain the one person he's with.

We walk out before the crowd fully disperses. Styles lingers a second to take some photos of the room before he heads out to get ready for his concert, where he'll bounce around the stage, lifted by the wails of young fans who have been waiting years for this moment.

His fans will linger tonight, too, crowding in the hundreds outside Volksparkstadion. They'll take photos of their outfits, their tear- and sweat-stained glittery faces, the piles of abandoned boa feathers. They'll play his big hits back to him, holding a phone-light vigil as they sing One Direction's "Night Changes" or the *Fine Line* ballad "Falling." As the city echoes as much of him as it can take, he'll probably be washing it all away. ℞

↪ THE BATTLE FOR 'COP CITY'

[*Cont. from 30*] tle tree stands, while police officers made reckless cuts through neighboring trees in a cluster of stands known as "Spite City." Within days, though, the tree sitters had rebuilt, naming their new cluster "Vengeance Village."

On Saturday, my plans to join a supply run from the east-side kitchen to these tree dwellers are delayed when heavy rain makes the creek impassible. But the next morning, two defenders, Eggplant and Vervain, agree to take me in by another route. We drive in a wide loop around the forest, stashing our vehicles on a quiet residential street near a small trailhead that leads into the otherwise fenced-off Old Prison Farm side. As we enter, Eggplant pulls up the hood of their ghillie suit, a matching camouflage jacket and pants covered in dangling cloth foliage. Vervain opts to wrap a T-shirt around their head.

"A lot of what living on this side is, is just sitting in trees, hiding in the forest very quietly, watching," Eggplant says.

We visit several tree stands, to which Eggplant and Vervain signal. There is no response. Still, Eggplant says someone likely saw us come in. Not much escapes the eyes hiding in the forest. The pair lead me up to the Old Prison Farm ruins, covered in graffiti, empty beer bottles lying on benches and rusted steel tables in dark cells. Teens come here to party; dirt bikers have been riding the hiking trails for years.

On our way out of the dilapidated building, Eggplant stops. "Do you hear that?" they ask. "Voices." We all freeze. I think I hear a murmur in the background. Police activity is lighter on the weekends, but it's not uncommon for foot patrols to roam the forest, looking for food caches, tree stands, or forest defenders caught unawares. Eggplant creeps to the old prison building's entrance, letting off a low whistle. *Poo-wee. Poo-wee.* No response. "OK," they say. "I think we're fine. But let's leave soon."

The forest camp, on both sides of the river, exists in defiance of the state, but also at its mercy. Nearly everyone here knows they can be swept out by force at any time. When the big raid comes, though, multiple forest defenders have told me, there will be a lot of people who don't go quietly.

The fight is getting uglier, and the net is tightening. While Atlanta and DeKalb County police have largely focused their actions to this point on the far side of the forest, leaving the DAF communal village relatively untouched, that may be changing: Three days after I depart, cops and workers start clear-cutting trees near the remote-control airfield on the park side, possibly in an attempt to create an access route for machinery that won't get through the well-defended parking lot. A tire barricade went up in flames during that clash, belching black smoke above the forest.

Not long from now, the camp could be cleared, the tree-sits torn down, the defenders jailed. But what will linger, perhaps, is the growing sense among America's younger generations that there are ways to enact change outside of the traditional halls of power.

During my final hours with DAF, a slim person with buzzed hair and scattered tattoos approaches me at camp. They introduce themselves as Cardboard and say they've been living across the creek, in the trees, for more than seven months. I ask Cardboard why they'd chosen to stay on that side, to sacrifice even more comfort and assume even more risk.

"I fucking hate the police," they say. "And I want to be free." ℞

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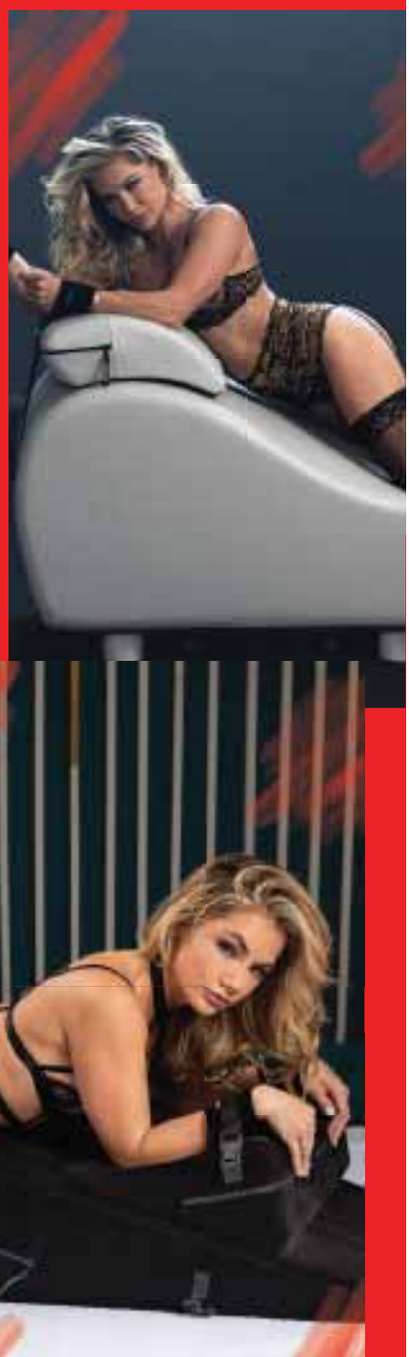

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[*Cont. from 43*] thing behind the day he vanished, even his beloved Gibson. "That hurt me for a long time because I really loved him," she says. "That's all I knew. He was my guy, he protected me; I felt safe."

Womack says she didn't report Little missing, as she was young and didn't know what to do. Johnny didn't have his Social Security number and couldn't file an official report. "I think about him a lot," O'Sullivan says, "because we didn't have no time to grow up. That's what I'm missing. When the O'Jays used to come to Cleveland to play, Frankie wasn't with them. We missed all these good times. The O'Jays are still around, but he's not. And that hurts. I don't even listen to them anymore."

In the end, it was O'Sullivan who helped crack the cold case, according to Detective Hendershott – but only after years of arduous work and dead ends. Less than two miles from Laurent Corp., Hendershott sits at a long conference table at the Twinsburg Police Department, decades of files spread out before him. He's tall, broad, and hirsute, but his voice is young, careful. The fact that he wasn't alive in 1979 when Little went missing is extremely apparent.

Little's case is far from the only murder on the town's books, but it was the only cold case. "It's been bounced around to new detectives," Hendershott, 35, explains. "So, back in 2018, I was brand-new to the bureau, and I was given my shot with the case."

He studies the papers in front of him: an *Akron Beacon Journal* article, a photo of a 2009 sketch that was supposed to be a replica of the then-John Doe, an image of a clay 2017 model, and the only photo anyone has of Little, an old high school snap that looks nothing like either. In it, Little is handsome, if unsmiling, with close-cropped hair, dark, strong brows, and sleepy eyes.

There's also a press release from 1982 from the office of the coroner in Akron, Ohio, which tells the macabre tale of how the then-unidentified skull traveled all the way to the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C., to determine the cause of death. According to Lisa Kohler, the medical examiner for Summit County, since all they had were bones, they needed the expertise of an anthropologist. The anthropologist offered up a host of possibilities of what could have happened to the man, all horrible: He may have suffered blunt trauma, a shotgun blast, dismemberment – the latter almost a certainty given how his body was discovered. According to Hendershott, less than half of the body was found on Cannon Road, and those pieces have stayed, until now, at the Summit County Medical Examiner's Office in the evidence area. The other half is still lost, carried off, perhaps, by animals.

When Hendershott finally got his turn with the case, there had already been a few efforts to identify the body: In 2009, they extracted DNA from the skull's teeth and uploaded it to the FBI's DNA database, CODIS, but no matches were found. In 2017, they partnered with the Ohio Bureau of Criminal Investigation to create the clay model, a photo of which was sent out to the public in hopes that someone would recognize the man. "We'd get calls, but nothing seemed to go anywhere," Hendershott says. "We really didn't have much to start with."

Finally, in 2018, Hendershott heard that police were able to ID and arrest the Golden State Killer using forensic genealogy, and a lightbulb went off. In that case, authorities and genealogy experts were able to use DNA evidence from one of the killer's crime scenes to create a comprehensive DNA profile of the unknown man. They then uploaded that information to an open-source database called GEDMatch, which lets users import raw DNA data and track down family members. When they got a hit on a distant relative, authorities and genealogy experts were able to study the suspect's family tree, finally ID'ing the serial killer, Joseph James DeAngelo, by obtaining a DNA sample from him and matching it to their profile.

To solve his mystery, Hendershott partnered with the DNA Doe Project, a nonprofit that helps ID the dead. The Doe Project created a DNA profile, which it uploaded to GEDMatch and another database called Family Tree DNA. From there, Hendershott was able to build out a family tree, which included several people named "Little." After calling a few Littles across the country to no avail, Hendershott finally landed on O'Sullivan, whose son and his wife had used a genealogy site in the past. Hendershott called her in late 2021, and after a brief conversation, discovered that she had a cousin, Frankie, who had been missing for decades. "It's pretty crazy that all it took was one phone call to his cousin," Hendershott says. "Margaret is really the one that solved everything." O'Sullivan introduced the cop to Johnny Little, Frankie's brother, who was able to provide a saliva sample and positively ID Frankie once and for all.

"It's pretty crazy that all it took was one phone call to his cousin," Hendershott says. "Margaret is really the one that solved everything."

"It was hard to believe at first," Hendershott says. "There were definitely doubts. I remember making the call to Margaret and coming back to the station and talking to the other detectives and telling them that 'I think we got an ID.' And it was like . . . that was it. That half was done, but now, the investigation: We got an ID, now we have to figure out what happened to him."

While Hendershott was rifling through the branches of Little's family tree, Little's nephew Shawn Jones was celebrating the holidays with his relatives in Georgia – the biggest get-together they'd had in years. That all fell apart when they found out, finally, what happened to Frankie. The whole family was confused and upset, especially Johnny.

"That was a total shock. We always wondered where he was, but we had no idea. These detectives, they didn't sweeten it up. They told us exactly what they had found," Johnny says, referring to the condition of Frankie's body.

Sure, the family was relieved, in a way. Frankie hadn't left them. He hadn't deliberately lost touch. But what had happened to him was almost too terrible to bear – murdered, dismembered, tossed aside like trash. Even months later, sitting on the couch of her Cleveland home in her church best – a yellow-and-black striped dress and matching hat – O'Sullivan can't speak about Little without crying.

"Why would someone do him like that?" she asks, her voice getting angry under the tears. "He was a nice guy. He never bothered nobody. You hated Frankie that well, to do something like that? It made me think you don't have a heart to do somebody like that. To cut up somebody like that. Like a chicken."

That's the question that family and authorities are grappling with to this day, because, by all accounts, Little was not the type of man to end up murdered – especially in such a gruesome way. Hendershott says Little had no criminal record to speak of, and he's still stuck on how the man ended up in Twinsburg. While O'Sullivan says she heard Little was playing shows in the tiny town back in the Seventies, both Hendershott and Bonnie Williams, president of the Twinsburg Historical Society, say there's never really been a music scene there. That means Little, who was living in East Cleveland at the time of his disappearance, was likely dumped, which adds another question to the list. "If something is drug- or crime-related, usually someone would just kill someone and leave them there," Hendershott says. "So we're going through different theories about why someone would go through all these steps to bring him here."

Johnny wants the cops to look into a cousin of his who was involved with some shady characters, while Womack told Hendershott about that neighbor – the one Frankie was mad at when he went missing. She says her aunt, who lived down the block, never got a good feeling from the man; Womack can't recall his surname but says she heard he may have murdered his wife or girlfriend a few years after Frankie vanished. Plus, she told Hendershott, he was a Black man in his fifties who drove a dark-colored station wagon, an eerily similar description to the man Lawrence says he saw back in 1979 dumping the bag containing Frankie's body.

Now, Hendershott is on the hunt for any proof that such a murder took place – and, in turn, for the man who may have committed the crime. Was this the person who vanished Little more than 40 years ago? Could we be this much closer to finding out why Little's life ended so violently – and how his body came to be found in pieces in a distant town? Hendershott isn't sure, but he's hopeful. After all, a year ago the public didn't even know Frankie's name.

Frankie Robinson has an article about his father taped to his cell wall by his bed at Grafton Correctional Institution, where he's been since 2006 for manslaughter – a bar fight gone wrong that he regrets to this day. There, Little can watch over him and Bret, a double doodle that he trains as part of a prison certification program. He thinks he and his dad look like twins, and he's not wrong – Robinson has that same strong brow as seen in Little's school photo.

Talking about his father, Robinson brings up again and again that Little cared for him – that his life would have been different had he not disappeared. "If my dad was here, I wouldn't be here right now," he laments. "He loved me that much, that he would have made sure I did the right thing."

The father he only knew for a few short years is never far from Robinson's mind. "I dream about him carrying me around. About 'Mockingbird,'" he says about the song his father would sing to him. "That's super glue. It'll never come off my memory. Usually in dreams I see myself smiling at my dad. Just a little baby, looking up at my dad." ®

[*Cont. from 63*] single year. At the conclusion of that damning investigation, the Pentagon sacked nearly the entire chain of command at Fort Hood.

Twice as many soldiers died at Fort Bragg for two years running, and across the board, there were more incidents of homicide, suicide, and drug overdose. Sexual assault is also a major problem at Fort Bragg, as ROLLING STONE has previously reported. Yet Congress has done absolutely nothing about it.

Fort Bragg is left to police itself, but there are serious questions about the sufficiency of the military justice system to deal with systemic drug crimes and substance abuse. When a soldier dies from an overdose or an accidental drug poisoning, it's not always obvious who should be held responsible, or to what degree.

Friends of Disney's told his mom the name of the soldier suspected of selling the deadly fake Percocet to Diamond. That soldier was recently convicted of seven counts of drug distribution, busted down to private, dishonorably discharged, and sentenced to a year in prison. Bowman says she can't understand why he wasn't charged for an offense like manslaughter. "He's not in trouble for the deaths that he caused, because he didn't know what he bought," she says, incredulously. "Why are you not responsible for the risk that you just took?"

It is understandable that Bowman would want to see heavier punishment. "There's zero accountability," she says. "That's why these kids are dying."

But it's not at all clear that greater retributive justice would do anything to alleviate the drug crisis on Fort Bragg, or in the Army more generally. Even if the military jailed dealers for life, it would do nothing to bring back Disney and Diamond, or any of the others who have succumbed to overdoses recently. Nor would increased law enforcement do much to deter other soldiers from distributing drugs on-post, in all likelihood. Get-tough measures on part of police and prosecutors have done nothing to reduce the demand for narcotics, and demand will always beget supply. The 50-year history of the failed War on Drugs has taught nothing if not that.

Perhaps there is no greater symbol of our definitive loss in that interminable war than Fort Bragg itself. From this flagship base, the beating heart of the U.S. special-operations complex, the military apparatus behind the global War on Drugs deploys to the far corners of the world. Green Berets train security forces in countries like Colombia, El Salvador, and Honduras. Delta Force reportedly took part in the anti-cartel operations that killed Pablo Escobar and captured El Chapo Guzmán. Yet drive down Bragg Boulevard into the Bonnie Doone neighborhood of Fayetteville, and in between the storage facilities, mobile-home dealerships, and tattoo parlors, you will find roach motels full of addicts, indigent veterans camped out beneath bridges, and strung-out junkies hanging around boarded-up trap houses. The dismal tide of synthetic opioids and amphetamines has penetrated Fort Bragg's high-security gates, permeated through to the lowliest privates' barracks, and caused at least a dozen overdose deaths in just the last year. These dead soldiers, who far outnumber combat casualties, are clearer proof of the United States' unequivocal defeat in its longest-running international military campaign than a white flag run up over the main parade field. As the old saying goes: The War on Drugs is over – drugs won.

ON THE MORNING of Feb. 16, 2021, Andrea Bracken and her family gathered together at Arlington National Cemetery to inurn the ashes of her son Zachary. His death two months earlier had come as a complete shock to her and her husband. Spc. Zachary Bracken, a Special Forces candidate at Fort Bragg, was just 24. He had been an athlete in high school and a football player his freshman year of college, but dropped out in hopes of becoming a Green Beret. "He went into the Army with a purpose," Andrea says. "He wanted to go into Special Forces. He wanted to be a combat medic."

Her son's story is not atypical. He had dabbled in drugs before, including marijuana and Ecstasy. "He tried things," Andrea says. "Zach was very transparent." But he never would have chosen to take fentanyl, she believes. "My son was an EMT already," she says. "He knows what drugs are what."

Bracken is one of three Green Beret trainees, or soldiers in the Special Warfare Training Group, to die of a drug overdose recently. (The others were Pfc. Jamie Boger, in March 2020, from cocaine and fentanyl; and Staff Sgt. Van-Michael Ellis, in October 2021, from cocaine and alcohol.) The incident occurred when Bracken was off duty, at a friend's wedding. His blood-alcohol level was 0.11 percent at the time that he died, at 10:35 a.m. on Dec. 5, 2020, according to a report obtained through the FOIA. Bracken's system also contained 0.012 milligrams of fentanyl per liter of blood – a lethal dose.

That's not what it says on his death certificate, though. "'The cause of death could not be determined,'" his mother says, quoting the county medical examiner. "That's the way she put it." Andrea also had difficulty obtaining Bracken's vital records from the Army. "Can I get my son's records?" she asked them. "They said, 'Sure.' But they've had some issue.

"Although they expressed sympathy," Andrea continues, "the Army really had no interest in how he died. I have many unanswered questions, but nobody seems to give a shit."

It's a bitter sentiment echoed by the family members of other overdose victims. "They won't give me any answers," says Diamond's best friend, who was his legal next of kin. "They really hold their cards close to their vest. The whole thing was weird. They kept shuffling me around."

"The Army was just like, 'Here, go tie ribbons on trees,' " says Bowman. "They need to open their mouths and start talking about this. The Army needs to say, 'Yes, this is a problem. We know this is a problem, and we are going to try to remedy the problem.' But they don't want to acknowledge it."

It was freezing cold that February morning when the Bracken family met in Arlington. Above the uniform white tombstones, the trees were bare. Among the mourners was Zachary's sister, then 22. "She was his best friend," Andrea says.

The funeral ceremony had already begun. But there was one final shock in store for the family, as the military added insult to injury. There was some kind of confusion in Zachary's burial paperwork. "As we're waiting with many, many, many people, they come out and tell us we're going to have to take our son's remains home," she recalls. "They said that there was a glitch in the information that they got, and something was overlooked. They told us that we would have to take him home with us."

They drove back to Norfolk, Virginia, with Zachary's ashes in the car. At this point in the story, Andrea begins to cry. "There's no dignity in it," she says through tears. "It's no dignified way to die."

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Robert Plant

On success, critics, and what 'Stairway to Heaven' means to him now

You're from England's Black Country. What's the most "Black Country" thing about you?
The self-deflating humor. Sometimes I collide into people I knew when I was at the local town hall, and usually they're charmingly abusive. They celebrate success for 10 minutes, and then the rest of the time it's that success has gone to the wrong person or whatever. I love that.

> ***Plant and Krauss released 'Raise the Roof' last fall and are on tour through Sept. 12.***

How do you define success?
By the smiles on the faces of the people I'm working with, the demeanor, my own demeanor. Entertainment is fine so long as the person you're entertaining most of all is yourself. I'm a little wary of repetition.

I like watching you and Alison Krauss harmonize live. How do you connect when you do that?
We kind of watch each other when we're singing. I'm still slightly impish, so I might hold one syllable a little bit long, and she hangs on with me, and she doesn't know when it's going to end. The eyebrows tell everything, like she's asking me, "Why am I doing this? Why are you fucking about like this?" It's great.

When the first Led Zeppelin album came out, some reviewers (ahem, *Rolling Stone*) panned it. Is there anything to learn from negative press?
Absolutely nothing. It's bullshit. Beauty's in the eye of the beholder. The guy around *Rolling Stone* was not very happy at all.

In Zeppelin, you often sang about sex, and some people associate Led Zeppelin with debauchery and sexism. How do you feel about that aspect of the band now?
This morning I was playing that YouTube clip of Howlin' Wolf having a showdown with Son House; it's a black-and-white clip of "Meet Me in the Bottom." And I'm thinking about Robert Johnson and all the artists that I listened to, whether it was Memphis Minnie, "Me and My Chauffeur Blues," Muddy Waters, "Got My Mojo Workin'," and it was loaded with innuendo. With rock & roll singers, it was almost pantomime. It was another time, and there was nothing sort of malevolent or base; it was just part of the time.

Do you ever feel sad that the last time you appeared in public with Jimmy Page was at the "Stairway to Heaven" trial?
I think I may have seen him once since then. As a matter of fact, I'm hoping to see him tomorrow, because I'm going to London, and I've got a really good record by Robert Finley, *Sharecropper's Son,* that I want to give him for old times' sake.

After all these years, how do you calm people down when they meet you and treat you like their idol?
I'm flattered when people are kind, but it's not the be-all and end-all. I'm a guy who got older. And the thing is, I can still do all the shit I could do before, because occasionally through these shows I let it rip for a minute. I'm a pretty public person. I mean, I don't have to go in the telephone booth to get changed and come out with no shirt on. That might be a bit risky now. But you just keep moving and take everything as it comes around the corner.

My interpretation of "Stairway to Heaven" is you were speaking out against selfishness. Do you feel like people got the point of the song?
I have no idea; it was such a long time ago. I used to say it in Zeppelin, "This is a song of hope." I know Jimmy and the guys were really proud of the musical construction. They gave it to me and said, "What are you going to do about this?"

And so what do I think now? When I hear it in isolation, I feel overwhelmed for every single reason you could imagine. There was a mood and an air of trying to make it through. Everybody was reeling from Vietnam and the usual extra helping of corruption with politics. There were people who were really eloquent who brought it home far less pictorially and did a much better job of reaching that point. But I am what I am, and as my grandfather said, "And I can't be more am-erer." KORY GROW

ILLUSTRATION BY **Mark Summers**

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ONE OF ONE: RIC WILSON IS RIDING HIS OWN WAVE

By: Kwasi Boadi

PRESENTED BY BACARDÍ

A Ric Wilson record is equal parts kinetic energy and pensive sensibilities. The Chicago rapper's tongue-in-cheek wordplay blends seamlessly with gospel-tinted melodies and big brass arrangements that'll get your feet moving while you decode the complexities of his songwriting. The 26-year-old is a unique combination of his influences—an expansive list of MCs, poets, and critical thinkers, from Stevie Wonder and Black Thought to Eartha Kitt and James Baldwin. "They focused on making the best art they wanted to make," he says of his artistic muses. "Over time this helped them break down boundaries." He adds D'Angelo, Erykah Badu, Macy Gray, and Jay Electronica to the running list. "Those are the types of artists who inspire me."

Creating the art you want to make sounds like simple advice, but it can be a hinderance in an industry that rewards conformity more than it does coloring outside the lines. Despite this, Wilson refuses to be boxed in, even if this approach didn't always serve him well during his early years. He recalls a specific conversation with a friend who told him: "Man, your s—t is dope, but sometimes it sounds like you don't be paying attention to what other people are listening to." Wilson finally struck a chord in 2016 with his elastic single "Soul Bounce." "That's when people were like, 'Oh, okay! I see what you're doing. You got something going on here,'" he recalls.

Before he was a rapper, Wilson was an engaged community organizer with a penchant for poetry and spoken word. A self-proclaimed "protest baby," his big break came in 2014 during demonstrations that were held in the wake of Mike Brown's murder at the hands of police in Ferguson, Missouri. That summer, activists throughout Chicago were looking for artists capable of channeling the community's pain and Wilson answered the call. "I came up in the streets protesting," he tells *Rolling Stone*. "I started doing my poems and spoken word readings at protests and they slowly turned into raps."

> "I STARTED DOING MY POEMS AND SPOKEN WORD READINGS AT PROTESTS AND THEY SLOWLY TURNED INTO RAPS."

Wilson's growing name recognition earned him a once evasive spot at YouMedia open mic nights—the same creative platform that sparked the careers of his Chicago contemporaries Chance the Rapper and Noname. From there, he made the pivotal leap to festival stages across the country, and it was during that time that he released his seminal body of work, *Banba*—an acronym for "Black Art Not Bad Art." On the 2018 release, Wilson pairs vibrant production with heartfelt storytelling that's illustrative of his formative years on the South Side of Chicago.

On his 2020 follow-up, *They Call Me Disco*, Wilson expanded his sound to something a little more left of center. Executive produced by Terrace Martin, the six-track EP sees Wilson employ the electronic synths and funky bass strums of Black disco luminaries like Homegrown Syndrome and MFSB. "I watched this documentary on disco and got influenced by it. I knew house music was Black, but I didn't know that disco was inherently Black and Brown," says Wilson of the inspiration behind the EP. "I wanted to take that back and reclaim it because I got so tired of people acting like dance music was only for white people." Wilson deftly foreshadows the road before him on "Breakin' Rules," the project's opening track: "*I don't follow no lanes, I don't care what you think*."

Wilson can't get too caught up in the opinions of his critics—the path he charted is lined with pundits questioning his steps. "I've always made the music I wanted to make, and in Chicago they'd say things like, 'That's pop,' or 'He's making R&B music.'" He pauses for a moment, contemplating his next words. He continues: "My music is influenced by some up-tempo stuff, but it's rap, and if we need to start freestyling acapella, I'll show you that what I do really is rap in comparison to what you're doing."

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His boldness is symptomatic of the challenges he had to overcome to get this far. Wilson is from a city that birthed some of hip-hop's most respected wordsmiths and widely adopted sub-genres. From the conscious "backpack raps" of Common and *Graduation*-era Kanye West to drill music torchbearers such as Chief Keef and Lil Durk, the central message in the Windy City's mantra is intentionality with your words. "To come out of Chicago, you've got to be a good rapper," Wilson affirms. "All the dance s–t came next. But I had to learn how to rap good first."

Later this year, Wilson will have ample opportunity to show just how sharp his pen game is. His long-awaited debut album is nearing completion, and before that, he plans to release a collaborative project with A-Trak (Kanye West, Kid Cudi, Danny Brown) and the electro-funk pairing Chromeo. "The bars on this next project are just like..." Wilson stops his stream of consciousness, not wanting to give too much away. Instead, he approaches it as a fan: "I listen to it like, 'Whoa, how did I even get that s–t out?!'"

In addition to two new full-length projects, he'll be teaming up with Toronto's resident sonic architect and go-to Drake collaborator, Boi-1da. Together, the pair will be creating a brand-new track as part of BACARDÍ's Music Liberates Music initiative, a campaign that aims to cut through the noise by brightening the spotlight on risings stars across the globe. "I'm excited to work with someone that influenced me to do music before they even knew who I was," Wilson says of Boi-1da. He's audibly thrilled at the prospect of creating with a producer whose music had such a huge impact on him. "I grew up on Boi-1da. [Drake's] *So Far Gone* is one of the first mixtapes I ever heard, and one of the mixtapes that encouraged me to literally start rapping."

Because of its focus on creating, the BACARDÍ partnership was a no-brainer for Wilson. "The reason I wanted to take part is because it's more centered around the actual music. Plus, I'm always looking for ways to push myself," he explains. Looking for the next challenge on the horizon is part of what makes Wilson tick. And regardless of the direction his broad artistic palette takes him next, one thing is for sure: Ric Wilson's going to do it on his own terms–take it or leave it.

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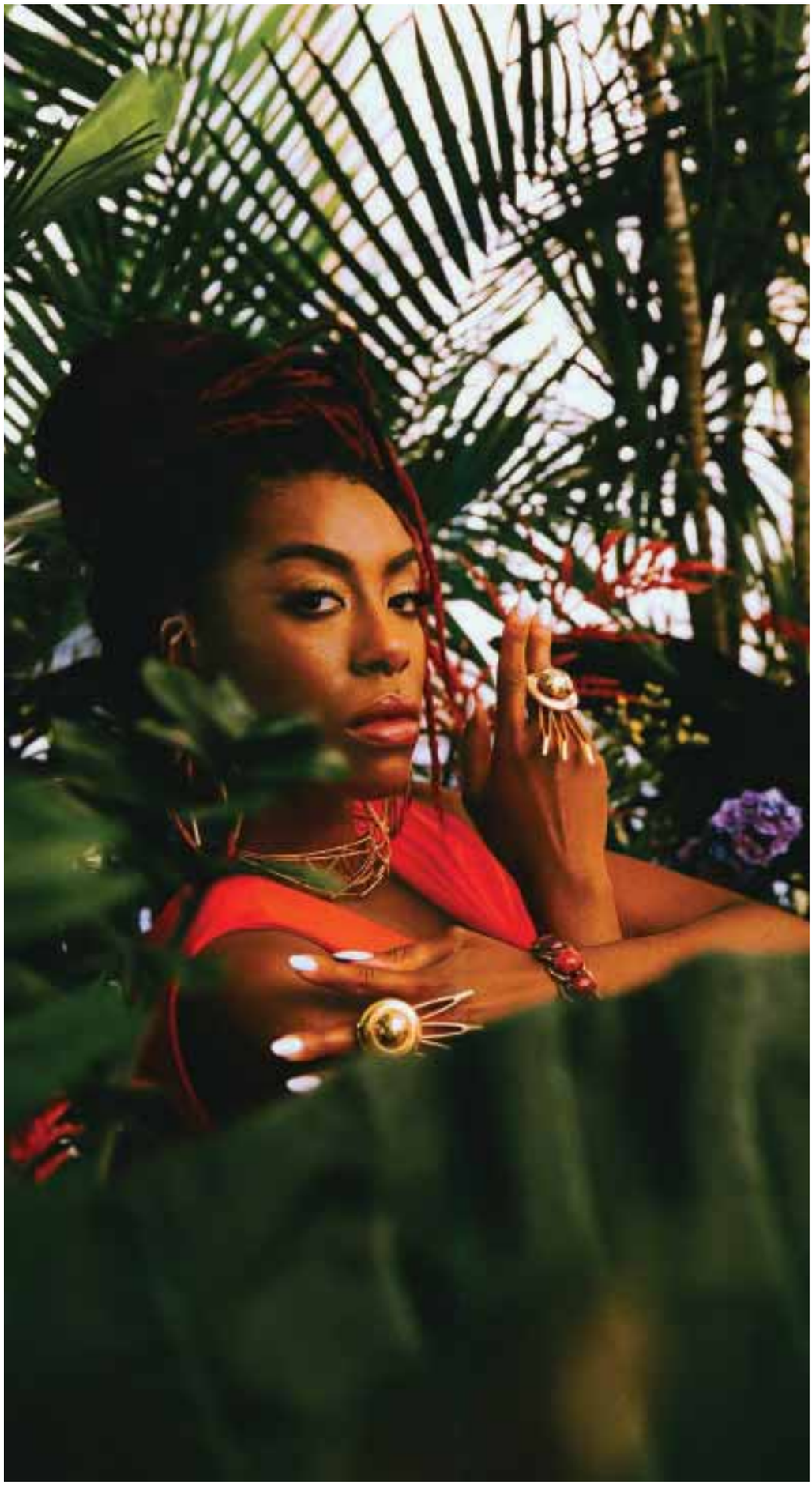

K.ZIA'S SOUND IS AN INVITATION INTO HER KALEIDOSCOPIC WORLD

By: Bianca Gracie

PRESENTED BY BACARDÍ

The music industry is continuously growing to be globally inclusive, knocking down barriers and boundaries to provide more opportunities for new voices to be heard. For K.ZIA, inclusivity is ranked high on her artistic to-do. The Brussels-born and Berlin-based singer-songwriter and director has called various pockets of the world her home, which has led to a genre-fluid sound that encapsulates her journey of experiencing the diaspora through a unique lens.

Born to a Martinican father (a circus acrobat) and a Belgo-Congolese mother (internationally acclaimed singer Zap Mama), the 28-year-old didn't have a stationary upbringing. Her household was a tour bus where she spent her formative years absorbing her parents' thrilling careers both backstage and on the stage itself. The singer's wide-eyed eagerness to perform materialized by age 14 when she assisted her mother with backing vocals during concerts and in the studio. At age 17, she was a singer for her father's show.

"I definitely think they're part of the inspiration. Being in this environment made me see a lot of different creatives [at an early age]," K.ZIA tells *Rolling Stone*. "The lifestyle my parents brought me into automatically felt like the best in the world. It's not that they didn't allow me to explore other worlds, but I never felt as good as I do in this one."

At age six, K.ZIA moved to New Jersey as her mother picked up work in New York City. It was during that nearly three-year span that the artist learned to read and write in English. Throughout this transitional period, she picked up her first three albums: Shakira's *Laundry Service*, Pink's *Missundaztood*, and Alicia Keys' *Diary of Alicia Keys*. These artists—along with other stateside acts like Destiny's Child, Lauryn Hill, Michael Jackson, Erykah Badu, and Rihanna—further helped to shape her unique artistry, and their influence can be heard on her 2018 debut EP, *Red*.

"I REALLY WANT TO BE A BRIDGE BETWEEN EUROPE, AFRICA, AND THE STATES BECAUSE THAT'S HOW I IDENTIFY MYSELF"

K. ZIA's music may have R&B as its foundation, but the genre's typical characteristics don't confine her. Her sound can't fit into a single box, and she intends to keep it that way.

"I feel like people of different ages can discover different types of sounds through my music. When they listen to me, they may be introduced to new genres and countries. I really want to be a bridge between Europe, Africa, and the States because that's how I identify myself," K.ZIA says. "Whenever I'm in Europe too often or too long, I really miss Africa. When I'm in the States, I really miss certain things about where I was born." Her lilting voice also cannot be tied to a particular culture. Referring to herself as a diamond, K.ZIA's indistinct accent is a product of being "taught, embellished and polished" by her experiences, parents, and peers.

"My songs are mostly about love. I live through the subject, whether it's love for others or love for yourself. I had a lot of self-love and self-confidence problems as a kid because I never felt like I could belong. Today, I'm building a shape-free sanctuary for people to feel like they can fit with their entirety. That's also why my music has no boundaries," K.ZIA says of her involvement with BACARDÍ's Music Liberates Music initiative. "This campaign definitely aligns with the spirit of togetherness because it's bringing people from different worlds and places together to create and build collectively."

Her ability to bridge cultures shines through in K.ZIA's debut album, *Genesis*. Released in February, the album showcases the artist's signature blend of R&B, soul, pop, rap, and afrobeats. It also introduces her unapologetic and darker alter-ego "ZIA," who sings in French.

The newly-discovered persona was inspired by a conversation with K.ZIA's mother, who stated that she wasn't representing this side of her personality in her art.

"I started writing in French because I wanted to learn and also be more in touch with my roots. I wanted to interact with France, Belgium, and French-speaking countries in Africa. While I was reading, I started noticing that the words that I used, the way I express myself, and the subjects I wrote about were different." K.ZIA learned a more scholarly form of English in primary private schools and later attended public school as a teenager. Having those contrasting experiences, along with the desire to perfect her French, opened a new creative realm.

The experimentation will continue when she gets in the studio with Boi-1da, whose energetic production with stars like Drake, Beyoncé, and Nicki Minaj is what K. ZIA was eager to tap into for her own sound. The collaboration is the byproduct of their mutual partnership with BACARDÍ, and she intentionally doesn't want to project herself too much in the process. Instead, she hopes the record will be a seamless melding of her and Boi-1da's creative worlds. That sense of freedom is at the core of the ongoing BACARDÍ Music Liberates Music program, where rising artists feel both supported and inspired.

"Art is something that inspires, guides, or helps people in moments where you're confused, sad, angry, or anxious. It can be liberating—there are very strong messages that come through music, to learn and to grow," she states. "There are so many people doing music and so many places where you can release music. It's very difficult to do things by yourself and make sure that the right people hear it, or that people hear it at all, she says. "I'm really grateful for projects like this campaign, where they're giving artists like BenjiFlow, Ric Wilson, and I an opportunity to collaborate with someone amazing like Boi-1da."

As K.ZIA works on new projects (along with the Boi-1da collaboration, she is in the studio penning her next EP), she intends to expand her global reach even further. "I like to see myself as a cocktail. I'm a mix of many tastes, and colors that make myself a unique experience."

BENJIFLOW BET ON HIMSELF AND HE'S STARTING TO REAP THE REWARDS

By Will "ill Will" Lavin

PRESENTED BY BACARDÍ

Persistence is an essential trait for anyone chasing their dreams, especially those trying to break through in today's wildly oversaturated music industry. "I was so close to giving up chasing a career in music so many times," reveals North London singer, songwriter, and producer BenjiFlow. The 26-year-old is one of three artists BACARDÍ has partnered with for its latest Music Liberates Music program, an initiative created to amplify rising musical talent. "Things can get tough and feel like they're never gonna happen for you, but you've got to stay the course."

It also helps to have talent, which Benji possesses in spades. Born into a musical family, his father, a Pentecostal pastor at an East London church, performed in gospel groups alongside Benji's mother, who he met during the latter part of their teens. Benji's sisters and cousins would often sing background vocals at the church and his mother's side of the family was comprised of saxophone players, drummers and keyboardists. "When I look back on it now, it was incredible," Benji tells *Rolling Stone*.

The young crooner, who grew up in Edmonton, a small town in the London borough of Enfield, is grateful for his family's rich musical lineage and his Jamaican roots. "If my parents weren't playing gospel music, they were listening to Bob Marley, Dennis Brown, and loads of other reggae greats," he says.

> THINGS CAN GET TOUGH AND FEEL LIKE THEY'RE NEVER GONNA HAPPEN FOR YOU, BUT YOU'VE GOT TO STAY THE COURSE

As he moved into his teenage years, Benji's musical tastes broadened. When he wasn't listening to the popular grime artists of the day – Dizzee Rascal, Wiley, Chip, and others – he was exploring the sounds of Herbie Hancock, George Duke, Norah Jones, Joni Mitchell, and even the Spice Girls. "'2 Become 1' is a slapper," he says of the girl group's 1996 chart-topping hit. But his favorite artists, and the ones who would ultimately go on to become his biggest influences, were Kanye West, Pharrell, and Skepta, the Tottenham grime MC that Benji calls his "UK hero."

It wasn't long before Benji decided to try his hand at rapping. "I wasn't that good," he says of his early lyrical capabilities. During this time, he met Ragz Originale, his longtime friend and collaborator and the producer responsible for some of the tracks on Skepta's Mercury Prize-winning 2016 album, Konnichiwa. Eventually, Benji and Ragz, along with rapper Oscar WorldPeace and singer Cartae, joined forces to form the Minikingz collective.

"We weren't super close at first, but we were the ones who carried on making music after everyone else stopped," Benji says of Ragz. Their bond grew tighter once Benji, who had turned his attention to producing, returned from college where he studied music technology. "We met up and I played him some of my beats," explains Benji. "He said I had some good ideas but that my drums needed work."

Ragz offered to help Benji with his beats and returned the following day with a hard drive full of drum kits. "That's when I think we knew we would be really, really good friends," he says.

From there, Benji dedicated his time to developing as a producer while trying to get some high-profile placements; however, the goal proved elusive. "I faced a lot of rejection," Benji explains. "People were telling me my stuff was too left or that we should try something another producer was doing." It wasn't until Benji decided to start producing for himself that the tide began to turn in the right direction. "I would record reference tracks with me singing on them," he recalls. "One day, I was playing one of them in the studio, and a guy I was producing at the time walked in and heard it. He loved it.

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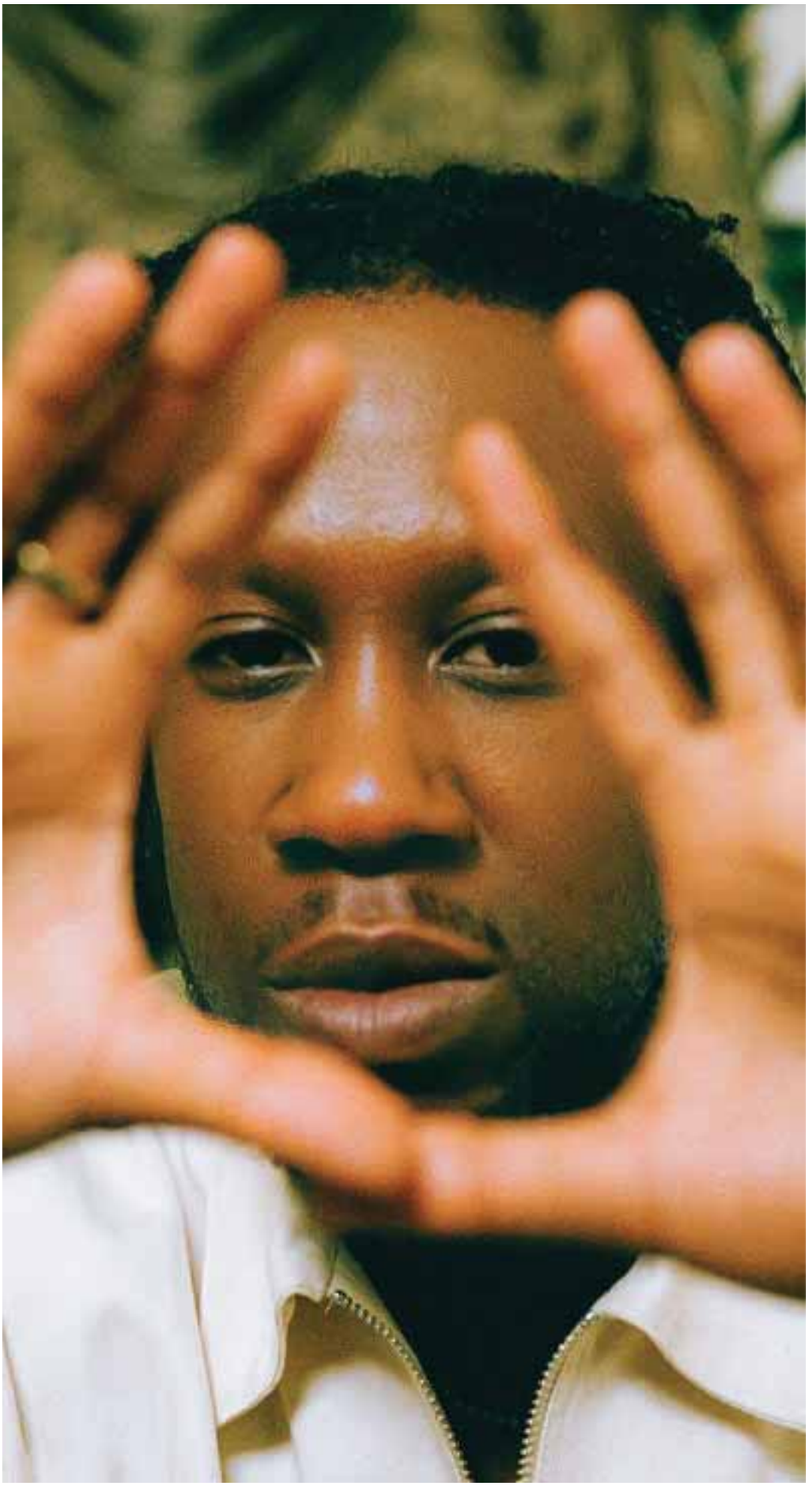
It was only a rough demo, but he asked if I could burn him a copy so he could take it home with him. That's the moment I decided to pursue singing."

Taking a risk, which is something Benji and the rest of the Minikingz collective openly promote, he quit his day job and put his faith in the music. "I did it to put absolute focus into the craft and to give myself the best chance, rather than going about it halfheartedly," he says. "I didn't expect the music to go anywhere; I just wanted to make something really good to give to the world."

And that's exactly what he did when he released his breakthrough single, the infectiously incandescent "Deep End," back in late 2018. Underscored by a mesmerizing Afro-Cuban rhythm, the Benji and Ragz-produced track served as the lead single for his debut EP *BENERGY*, which also delivered the sun-kissed, guitar-led single "Can't Lose."

But with so many new artists coming out each week, how did Benji separate himself from the pack? "Whenever I release something, I want there to be an experience behind the music," he says, expressing a desire for something more tangible. "I want someone to feel something when they hear it."

This tactic aligns with BACARDÍ's mission to promote a more inclusive and creative environment through its Music Liberates Music program. Powered by the collaboration between promising up-and-comers and industry heavyweights, part of the initiative sees Grammy-winning producer Boi-1da team up with three musicians from different parts of the world to create original tracks. "It's crazy that I'm going to be making a track with him, but I'm very ready for the moment. I can't wait to see where his mind goes when we get in the studio and what he thinks my next step should be musically."

And just like Boi-1da is doing with him, Benji hopes that one day he'll be able to help bolster future generations of artists. "I want to be a part of guiding the best talent as they come up," he says. "I just want to help artists become their own moguls." As Benji sees it, musical liberation is something to be paid forward.